

A Misadventures of the Heart Novel

TANYA WILDE

Give Your
Heart
A
Rake



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Tanya Wilde

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Prologue

At the age of thirteen, Lucien Alexander, the not-quite-yet Earl of Craven, was run over by Alfred Buxton, the not-quite-yet Marquis of Linden, as the latter fled from a group of miscreants who sought to give him another bloody nose—something which they considered their own brand of entertainment. While Lucien could by no means be called a troubled child, he had, however, taken an enormous amount of pleasure in beating Alfred's bullies to a pulp. That, of course, resulted in the pair becoming best of friends and quite simply inseparable. As time passed, theirs was a relationship that transcended the bond friendship to enter that of brotherhood.

So they became brothers.

For always.

And having both been raised by uncompromising fathers, they were both tutored from a young age to value family above all. But as with all things, their relationship was not without its own trials. The most significant of which did not occur until eight years later. And like many other things, the heart of this trial would revolve around love and war.

"I've met a lady, Lucien!" Alfred exclaimed as they came to a halt on top of a hill on the Marquis of Linden's country estate. "I believe she is the *one*."

The smile on Lucien's face matched that of his friend's. "A lady, heh? Always thought you preferred a good old rod."

"Bastard, that joke has lost its fervor, you know."

"It still cracks me up."

"Yes, well, your prank is the one that had me on my knees in the headmaster's office. Even my father bought the rumors, threatened to box my ears if I didn't change my ways."

Lucien threw his head back and laughed. "So, this lady of yours, she reciprocates your feelings?"

"I believe so."

"Never would have suspected you were one for fanciful notions, let alone the belief in 'one true love.'"

"Neither did I, but the devil take me, when my eyes first fell upon her bewitching beauty, the world at my feet shifted."

Lucien yanked on the reins to angle his horse for a better view of the estate. "She must be quite the woman for you to fall so effortlessly in love. Am I to presume wedding bells will chime in the near future?"

Alfred didn't answer the question and instead replied, "I received a letter today. The war is moving farther east, and soldiers are dying."

Lucien let loose a string of curses. "You are considering enlisting."

"And if I were?"

"Don't be a tart, Alfred. You know as well as I your father will never allow it."

"He will threaten to cut me off," his friend agreed. "But we all know it's a bluff. I'm his only heir."

Lucien's innards clenched in fierce protestation at what his friend's words hinted at. "Forget about the war. Marry, have little Buxton babies, and leave the fighting to Wellington."

His friend looked away.

His heart sank. "You already signed up, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Damnation, Alfred!" Lucien snapped, running an exasperated hand through his hair. Maximillian, his horse, started to stomp his hooves, feeling his owner's agitation. Lucien soothed the beast with calming words, and visibly relaxed his own stiff posture.

After a moment he turned and shot his friend a glare. "If we die, I will bloody well kill you again."

"We?"

"Yes, we. Someone needs to make certain you don't get slaughtered."

While Lucien would happily throw himself under the hooves for his friend, that did not mean he had to be jolly about it.

"I would never ask you to enlist because of me," Alfred murmured, his expression now devoid of any emotion.

"I am aware," Lucien muttered. "Are you certain this is what you want? To risk your life on the battlefield?"

His friend nodded, but something moved across his face—a flash of emotion so deep and so raw that it startled him. It disappeared in the blink of an eye before Lucien could identify it. He gave his friend a hard look, trying to decipher where this sudden need to conquer came from, but his friend gave nothing else away. Nothing gave Lucien a

clue as to the reason for his sudden interest in war.

With a hard nudge, he spurred his horse forward, shouting over his shoulder, "So be it."

And with that, he followed Alfred Buxton into war.

Chapter 1

“They say he was skinned alive.”

Rosslyn Bakersfield’s head snapped up at that. She’d been so lost in thought, so engrossed in her list of potential husbands, that she’d quite lost track of the conversation. She glanced down at the scribbled names once more before folding the note and pocketing it.

Portia Evington pointed in the direction behind Rosslyn, who dutifully followed Portia’s finger to a man much more familiar to Rosslyn than she would have preferred. Her muscles contracted as her entire body tensed, her gaze drifting over his large form. A deep shudder tore through her. “Is that—?”

“Lord Craven in the flesh,” Portia confirmed with a nod.

Mary Adams, their other companion, snickered.

“And you say he was skinned alive?” Skepticism colored her disbelief.

“Yes, I overheard mother speak of it to her friends,” Portia said.

“I overheard the same from my aunt,” Mary agreed.

“You must be joking,” Ross said and gave her friends a hard look. “If he *had* been skinned alive, would that not make him dead?”

They seemed to ponder her statement and dismissed it. “That would make him without skin,” Mary put in.

Portia nodded.

“Then what do you imagine covers his face? A mask? Porcelain?”

Portia and Mary both scrunched their brows together and studied the earl with interest. Both their heads were tilted to the side, reminding Ross of two little puppies.

“Perhaps his face and hands were spared,” Portia murmured.

“That does make sense,” Mary once again agreed.

Ross glanced away but failed to keep her face free of incredulity.

Not because she believed them, goodness no, but because of the empty-headedness on their part. Surely they did not believe such hogwash? But knowing Portia and Mary as she did, they had in all likelihood eaten up every gossip word like butter cake.

For two years, she had drawn breath without setting eyes on Lord Craven—had not seen him since he came back from the war and informed her of her fiancé's death. Though she could hardly claim his acquaintance, she'd known Alfred to only sing the man's praises. She had never met the earl until that day—the day he arrived on her doorstep with the locket she'd given Alfred as a token of her love. It had been clear that Craven hadn't even meant to inform her, having instead come to tell her father the news of Alfred's death. But her father had been away on business at the time.

"I suppose one will never know," Ross murmured in distraction.

"What was that?" Portia asked.

"Oh, nothing, I was just wondering whether you've heard any news of Lady Lucinda."

The topic set the girls off in a chatty and unremarkably detailed account of Lady Lucinda's elopement with the clumsy Lord Beaverstoke, which of course Ross already knew all about but had wanted to change the subject to a safer theme.

Her return to London was supposed to symbolize a new start. So far escaping her past remained a fruitless venture. From the moment she arrived a week ago, Lord Craven's vexing name haunted her every step, like a leopard stalking its unsuspecting prey. Lord Craven, the name on almost every gossipmonger's lips, seemed to fascinate all of London. By all accounts, he was rumored to be a notorious rake, snatching young girls from their mother's arms and ravishing them. Nothing was ever mentioned of his past, however, and indeed, it appeared as though nobody had ever been informed he'd fought in the war.

Had Ross known the earl had taken up residence in London, she might have postponed her husband hunting until she was certain he'd departed. As rude as that may sound, she did not desire any more reminders of what she'd lost two years ago. The pain, an endless pit of torment, had haunted her for the better part of those years and only recently had she recovered some form of spark, and with it an urge for companionship. Well, that and her mother had grown tired of her sulking about their home in a tireless fashion.

"You have suffered a terrible loss, Rosslyn, but that doesn't mean your life has stopped, you still age with each passing day, my dear. Alfred would not have wanted you to close yourself off from the world. He'd have wanted you to find love again—preferably before your skin resembles that of a dry prune!"

Ross flinched as she recalled her mother's reprimand, touching the flesh of her hand for good measure. Ultimately, it had been those wise words that had prompted her eagerness to reenter society—though on her own terms. She would marry, by all means, but only to a man who posed no danger to her heart. Her husband should also be in possession of mild mannerism, so as to not be bothered to tell her what to do or how to do it. She'd give him an heir and perhaps a spare, though she would prefer a daughter. They would all live a happy, entirely uncomplicated life.

Yet it was sad to say her mother may have been correct in her attempt to get Ross to return to society as soon as possible. In the two years since she stepped out of the *haut ton* to mourn her beloved Alfred, not only had most of the desired gentlemen married, but even the most timorous of gentlemen had managed to secure wives. Thus, her list of eligible husbands was one of meager scrapings. That should have made the choice easy, except the pickings for someone her age were even slimmer. Most of the unattached gentlemen were either too young or too old. At one and twenty, still a fledgling truth be told, she appeared to be overlooked.

Luckily, love needn't be factored in. So after eliminating the too young and the too old, she'd proceeded to scratch off all the other men that did not meet her criteria: too rakish, too rotund, too smelly, too drunk, too little hair, too many teeth—and so forth. Not that she saw anything particularly wrong with those features, but since she'd be spending the duration of her life with this man, share a *bed* with the gent, and do her duty by him, it seemed to her that he should at the very least be passable. So the list of already meager scrapings had been reduced to a whopping number of six gentlemen.

A painless task, no?

"He is very handsome."

"Who?" Ross asked, having been brought back to the present by Portia's statement. "Lord Beaverstoke?"

"No, Lord Craven," Mary whispered.

Oh, blast, back to Craven again.

"Why are you whispering?" Ross asked.

"Because he is looking this way!" Portia murmured with a giggle.

And immediately she wished she hadn't. Asked, that is.

Her head snapped his way, and indeed, he was looking straight at them. To her utter dismay, their eyes locked for a brief second before she snapped her head back again.

She did *not* need this now.

It was hard, no, *impossible* to imagine how Alfred had become friends with the earl. Her fiancé had been a sweet and kind man, not rude or obnoxious or...heartless like Craven. Yes, "heartless" was the

precise word that came to mind when one gazed upon Craven's stony and chiseled countenance.

"I think he is staring at me," Mary gushed with an unmistakable note of pleasure.

"Don't be daft, his eyes are fixed on me," Portia said. "It's obvious by the way his body is angled in my direction."

Lord, take me now.

Ross only barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes heavenward. Of course, they did not know that she'd met the earl, or that her fiancé had been his best friend. The world had all but forgotten Alfred. Just like her mother had said, the world had not stopped at all, but rather moved on quite efficiently.

Something in Ross rose to the surface then, something wild and untamed, spurred on by society's lack of empathy and their blatant refusal to acknowledge the dead.

Well, she'd remind them.

"If the earl is staring at anyone, it is me," Ross declared, lifting her chin as the two girls' eyes whipped to her.

Her tone must have given away that they shared some kind of history, because Portia said, "You are acquainted with the earl, then?"

Ross inwardly cursed. An acquaintance suggested a familiar relationship and theirs was quite the opposite. "The earl and my late fiancé, Lord Alfred Buxton, heir to the Marquis of Linden, were best friends, though I only met the man once."

The girls blinked, their brains piecing together portions of a puzzle long since tossed into the attic.

"Lord Buxton, who perished in battle?"

Ross gave a curt nod, clenching her teeth at the curiosity in the girl's voice.

"Oh! I have quite forgotten you were engaged to Lord Buxton!" Mary exclaimed, her bright eyes only irking Ross even more. She paused, a slow smile forming on her face. "Perhaps Lord Craven is finally in search of a wife, then," Mary finished.

A wife? Craven?

An illogical conclusion if Ross had ever heard one.

"What makes you think that, Mary?" Portia asked.

"Well, why not? He has only recently taken up residence in London again and his best friend hadn't been against marriage. Perhaps he's ready now, too."

Ross wanted to slap the girl, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut. Now they would never get off the topic of Craven.

And why was her blasted heart slamming against her chest, leaving her breathless? She began searching the crowd for an avenue of escape.

"The Countess of Craven! Can you imagine it?" Mary asked.

The Countess of Craven.

No, Ross certainly could not imagine it.

"Perhaps, he shall choose me!" Portia exclaimed as another bout of giggles sprung from her lips.

Ross turned away from them, wishing Portia luck. The girl would need it if she attempted to penetrate the thick, icy walls of the earl's frozen heart.

Miss Rosslyn-bloody-Bakersfield.

The last woman he'd ever thought to see. His muscles flexed when her companion, a malicious little chit by the look of her, pointed a deuced finger straight his way. He was about to bare his teeth at her when Miss Bakersfield whipped her head around.

Emerald eyes locked with his from across the room.

Unprepared for the wild beating of his heart that followed, he cursed beneath his breath. He'd been watching her before that moment, watching as she stood still, completely focused on a letter in her hands before she folded and tucked it away in the folds of her dress.

What on God's green earth was she doing in London? She was supposed to be in the country, ideally married to a country gentleman, and living out her days in peace. She was meant to be there—there, where Lucien did not have to watch her turnabout the room, happy as a peach while he marinated in misery.

He'd been completely caught off guard when he spotted her amidst the crowd earlier. At first, he had thought he'd imagined her—that his mind had conjured her up as a cruel reminder of his friend's death. Unwelcome memories had assailed him, tortured images of pain and blood. His skin had felt too tight across his bones, as if he'd just crossed the desert without so much as a drop of water.

Clenching his jaw, he worked his mind away from the impressions, the echoes of events that had transpired.

When he had realized it was not his mind but his reality that had conjured her, he'd leaned back against a stone marble pillar to observe the lady through hooded eyes. More images had assaulted him then, but this time of her, staring up at him with such hopefulness until he shattered her world with the return of her locket. It had been two years since he'd seen her face.

Rosslyn-bloody-Bakersfield.

He recalled only too vividly how she had frowned at the necklace, blinking as if to put something important together, something he had yet to reveal. The confusion in her eyes had punched him in the gut, as had her refusal to believe the evidence he'd presented.

“Where is Alfred?” she’d asked. “I do not follow.”

By then, Lucien had seen enough death to understand that only clear and precise words could overcome the denial rooting itself firmly in her mind.

“He is dead, madam. He died in battle. My condolences on your loss. Please relay the news to your father. I’m sure he’ll take great comfort in it.”

He still cursed those parting words, sneered purposefully to hurt her. Alfred had cared a great deal for the woman and would no doubt have rolled in his grave if he’d heard Lucien that day. Hell, Alfred had *loved* her and Lucien had treated her like she’d been the one to send his friend to an early death.

More troubling was the reason behind his rude response. Struck blind by the first sight of her, he recalled wondering how the deuce Alfred had managed to ensnare such a creature’s heart. But then he also called to mind the true reason his friend had enlisted in the war at all.

Her.

What had it been about Miss Bakersfield that his friend would dive into the battlefield for?

Of course, Lucien already knew the answer. Her father had insisted upon it—had wanted a war veteran for a son-in-law. Or so he had said. Lucien knew better now.

Alfred had been heir to one of the oldest titles in England, whereas Miss Bakersfield was the only daughter of a baron. Almost anyone would say his friend had been a catch, the best match she might ever make.

Christ, she was no beauty either—though pretty certainly in an average sort of way. Where other ladies’ skins were white as marble, her upper cheeks and nose sported a rich amount of freckles. Miss Bakersfield clearly enjoyed the outdoors and did not care for wearing a bonnet, which spoke of a rebellious nature. Deep green eyes were framed by long, dark lashes, full of life and mischief. He recalled that day how her chestnut hair had been braided around her head with carefully arranged flowers weaved into her plaits. She’d reminded him of a forest nymph. She had looked young and innocent, too young to marry. And then she had smiled, and one small indentation appeared on her right cheek, taking another two years off her age. Devil take it, if he hadn’t known his friend so well, he may have thought Alfred had decided to marry a thirteen-year-old girl.

But what had haunted him the most over the past two years had been that with a few poorly chosen words, he’d erased the innocence in her eyes, wiped it from her features and her heart. In the single span of one mere moment, he’d given her a glimpse of a world she

may have otherwise been oblivious to—a cruel world where people did not give a damn. And now she had returned to the fold only to remind him of all his shortcomings, of his guilt, of his pain.

Dammit all to hell!

He wanted her gone. The further away the better. Had her father come to London, as well? Lucien bloody hoped not, or he would have a long talk with the baron.

But the thought begged his next question: Did Miss Bakersfield shoulder the knowledge of what her father had done? The reason he'd sent her fiancé, *his* best friend, to war?

Lucien prayed that was not the case, for should he ever discover she'd known of her father's hand in it, he would destroy her as thoroughly as he had destroyed the baron.

Her green eyes broke from his, then, but not before a sweet, tortured frisson of awareness rippled down the length of his spine.

She turned away, giving him her back. A telling sign of her sentiment, he mused with a shake of his head. He watched with interest as she turned her head slightly to each side, looking for an escape.

Lucien nearly laughed.

As if she could escape the Earl of Craven.

Chapter 2

“Miss Bakersfield.”

Rosslyn’s entire body stiffened at the low, rumbling voice that purred her name in its velvety, sensual timbre. Even syrupy sweet, his voice still dripped of displeasure, an unmistakable note that was lost on her companions but not on her. She watched as Portia’s and Mary’s eyes widened in fascination and awe, just before their lips stretched into coy, flirtatious smiles.

Ross, who stood with her back to the earl and thus hadn’t spotted his approach, stared hard at her friends. She amended that thought. To call them friends would imply an association where she enjoyed their company when in fact she only tolerated it—and barely. “I take from your gawking that the elusive Earl of Craven is standing behind me?”

A ridiculous question, really, but perhaps if she ignored his presence, he’d slither back from whence he came. As expected, the girls paid her insult no heed and only giggled.

“It may be a difficult thing to grasp, Miss Bakersfield,” the husky timbre came again, “but I can hear you.”

Ross refused to acknowledge him. Instead, she mentally sought out all the reasons he may have approached her. Nary one came to mind. In fact, his unforgivably rude performance two years ago had shattered any friendship that may have formed out of mutual respect for their dear departed Alfred.

A hint of amusement entered his voice when he next spoke. “It is not every day I am bestowed with the pleasure of bowing at a lady’s backside, and I must confess, the sight is quite pleasing.”

Ross whirled around then, her eyes narrowing and her lips flattening into a pinched line, though not because of his shockingly

inappropriate comment, but because she realized she must look ridiculous standing with her back to the earl when it was evident for all who cared to glance their way he was conversing with their group.

Fastening her eyes on a face of sheer masculine beauty, Ross said, "My lord, what a delightful surprise! How many years has it been? Two?"

Thank goodness my voice remained steady.

He inclined his head, not at all fooled by her sudden politeness. "You remember well, Miss Bakersfield."

"One tends to rather easily call to mind the remarkably composed deportment of a man who had only just lost someone dear to him."

The insult hit home. His large frame shifted just an inch, his eyes flashing, the only visible sign of his annoyance.

"My lord," Portia interrupted their exchange. "May I say you look dashing tonight?"

"Quite well," Mary agreed.

As the earl's lip curled downward and his eyes, filled with distaste, roamed over the poor girls like he considered swatting them away with the back of his hand, Ross lifted a brow.

Ah yes, there is the man behind the mask now.

When the color drained from Portia's face, the opposite of Mary's sudden bright color, Rosslyn had enough. How dare he interrupt them and then proceed to treat her companions like nothing more than trash?

"I say, Portia, is that your mother waving you over?" Ross said, attempting to distract the girls and give them a possible escape from the discourteous earl.

Both women whirled around, scrunching their brows together, but it was Mary who chirped, "Oh! Why yes it is," catching on to Ross's boon. She grabbed Portia by the arm, dragging her in the direction Ross had just pointed in. "Come, Portia, let us go see what she wants." A very dejected Portia trailed after her.

Bless Mary for holding fast to her wits. Ross may not consider them friends, but the girls did not deserve the churlish manner in which the earl treated them.

She turned her most displeased glare to the man before her and in her most waspish voice snapped, "That was unforgivably rude, though not surprising since you are the most despicable person I have ever met!"

And with those parting words, Ross spun on her heel and stalked in the opposite direction, away from the odious man.

A strong hand snatched her wrist, halting her escape. "Just a moment, Miss Bakersfield. I wish to have a word."

His slow drawl filled her with loathing. "Let me be frank, my lord.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not like you nor do I wish to speak with you. Ever. And you do not speak words, sir. You glare and snap, a distinct difference I would say.”

“What are you doing here?”

Ross reeled back at the question. He had completely ignored her rebuff, as if her feelings were inconsequential, not even fit to be heard. Was this the reason he’d sought her out and boldly approached her? Simply to probe for scraps of information regarding her return? Surely he must know she’d never grant him anything he wanted, even if it was only something as trivial as information.

“I would think it obvious, my lord. I am enjoying the festivities.”

He shook his head, his eyes absorbing all the details at their disposal from her stiff posture to the stubborn set of her chin to the slight stretch of her lips. “Not here as in here in this room,” he growled, “here as in London.”

Ross stared into those frosty blue eyes intruding upon her very soul, perplexed. His eyes revealed nothing of his curiosity and neither did his expression reflect any emotion—though she doubted his intention was any good, regardless. Although in this close proximity it was easy to forget why she found him so loathsome. Standing beside the candles as they were, the red hue in his dark hair brought his light eyes to life, reminding Ross of an angel uncompromising in his stance, unyielding in his quest, unwavering in his resolve.

“Miss Bakersfield?”

The brusque rumble of her name from his chest snapped her out of her reverie.

She shot him a glare. “This may come as a surprise, my lord, but London does not belong to you, and neither does the right to any knowledge of my plans. Now, if you will excuse me, there are better ways to pass the time than in your irascible presence.”

Her words seemed to offer him nothing but amusement, and before she could administer another attempt at a grand retreat, his next words halted her. “Better ways? Now there is something I’d be delighted for you to divulge. Does it include gossiping with your vapid little friends?”

Vapid?

Her temper erupted. “How dare you claim them tedious? Has it ever occurred to you that their slow-wittedness only comes to light in times of extreme ignorance? They certainly did not deserve your ill-temper.”

“My, my, Miss Bakersfield,” the earl murmured, arching a mocking brow. “I am truly shocked. You preach about name calling in the same sentence you call your friends slow-witted. How rude of you.”

Ross gasped, her face flushing. “You are indeed a loathsome beast. Have you no care for anyone but yourself? You’ve just crushed a poor

girl's self-esteem—from which, I must add, she may never recover—and still, you believe I'd wish to converse with you? Do not presume to approach me again," she hissed the last with so much hostility he looked taken aback.

The action, however faint, was enough to press her forward and she continued her heartfelt assault. "Alfred used to speak highly of you and with so much passion. 'His brother of the heart,' he called you. I cannot help but wonder if he truly knew you, for I have only seen a man who is an empty void, bereft of any warmth. Perhaps that is why you befriended him? Perhaps your coldness sought out his warmth? As for what drew him to you, that answer lost to me, buried alongside Alfred."

The moment the words flew from her lips, Ross knew they'd been a mistake, harshly spoken out of anger rather than truth.

The earl's eyes hardened, his sinful lips slanting downward as his brows pulled together in a scowl. "Are you quite done defaming my friendship and disparaging my character?"

"No," Ross snapped back, unable to stop as years of anger at this man erupted to the surface, "but I am done for the night."

"How charitable of you to spare me," he bit out. "Now you can be so kind as to tell me what the hell you are doing back in London and what I must do to get you the hell out."

Ross placed one hand over her quivery stomach when she glimpsed the contempt in his eyes. She suspected he had allowed his disdain to be seen for a reason, perhaps to frighten her or perhaps to show her she was not the only one harboring such distaste. Then all at once, all the fight simmered out of her, a whisper of bewilderment taking its place.

"You claimed Alfred but for the space of a moment, Miss Bakersfield. Our friendship spanned across the better part of my life. I suggest you remember that the next time you imply your attachment outweighed our bond of brotherhood."

Ross glanced away from his probing eyes, shame vanquishing her anger. "I have just as much right to be here as you," she whispered.

"Do you even spare him a thought?"

She blinked, at first confused before understanding dawned. "Of course I do," she said, shocked that he may believe otherwise. She had loved Alfred. "Not a day passes that I forget."

He inclined his head, those frosty blue globes chilling even more. "Then I'd caution you to take care of your words, madam, or I will remind you just how little your time of courtship and your nauseatingly banal letters meant in comparison to my friendship." He ignored her gasp and continued, "I bore intimate knowledge of every one of his faults, his regrets, and his dreams—and he of mine. So if

you ever insult our friendship again, I do not care who the hell you are or what you meant to Alfred, I will crush you. Never presume to know me or my character, Miss Bakersfield, when this is but the second time we've met."

Ross jumped back as the earl shouldered his way past her, his hand brushing up against her skirts. She touched her clammy cheek, certain her face had lost its color during his tongue lashing, which, admittedly, she may have deserved.

Shame clung to her skin like a bad odor. The earl was right; she knew absolutely nothing about him or his friendship with Alfred, knew nothing of his grief. She only knew what she'd been told. Then she'd drawn her own conclusion of him, condemned him, and even blamed him for the death of her beloved.

The last letter her fiancé had ever written her had arrived months after the news of his death and had detailed the accounts of the Earl of Craven's capture by the enemy. Alfred had written to beg her forgiveness, but that he could do no other than save his friend, which he had gone to do at the cost of his life.

Still, that did not excuse her assertion of Craven's character. She did not know him, nor did she have any notion of how deep his and Alfred's friendship ran. Or actually, she had an idea. The letter had also detailed Alfred's guilt, for Craven had saved Alfred from the hands of the enemy only to be captured himself, and so Alfred, who had condemned himself for the affair, had felt compelled to save his friend in return.

Still, Ross had blamed the earl regardless, because Alfred had died and the earl had lived.

As she watched the earl exit through the doors, his back stiff with indignation, she admitted she ought to have chosen her words with better care. She suspected she had made a powerful enemy and hoped it did not come back to haunt her. He already made it clear he did not wish her here. Would he try to force her to leave?

Ross did not have the time nor did she possess the energy to war against him, not when her time was better spent finding a husband. All she desired was to settle down into a comfortable life.

She realized belatedly that her sharp tongue might just have cost her dearly.

Lucien stared at the piece of parchment he'd stolen from Miss Bakersfield's skirts with interest. Eight names were penned down in the lady's hand and he took the time to appreciate the gentle and graceful curve of her twirls.

He would recognize her writing anywhere, having read the letters she'd sent Alfred over their years abroad. There was something in the

flow of her hand that had always brought a wave of peacefulness to Lucien whenever he read them, though he'd never admitted it to his friend. It had never been clear to him why Alfred allowed him to read her correspondence, but he'd never questioned it either. Knowing Alfred, he probably wanted Lucien to also have a piece of home in those bleak times of war.

But all that aside, it appeared the lady had crawled out of her witch's lair in search of a husband. In fact, looking over the names, he was quite certain of it. It explained the reason she returned to London, certainly—but why not tell him that? Did her reluctance stem from his friendship with Alfred? Did she feel guilt for allowing her father to send his friend off to the war? Or had she been peeved at Lucien's utter lack of hospitality?

It mattered little now. She represented too many damn memories of a time he'd rather forget. His own guilt never strayed too far away from the hollow temples of his mind, the ever-present pinch of self-loathing as part of him as his skin.

Lucien sank down behind his desk, studying the names of the gentlemen and committing each of them to memory. The thought of her seeking a husband should not bother him, yet reading the names of the prospective gentlemen she'd chosen gave him the shivers. By saints, she'd picked the most tedious, unremarkable, or vilest of the lot.

Did she want a bloody stiff, spiritless man for a husband? Or, alternatively, a man whose activities outside the eyes of society would horrify those pretty green eyes? For some of the men she'd listed possessed some rather distasteful habits, ones no gently bred lady would know. They'd most likely even bring a few creases to her otherwise perfect penmanship.

He should leave her to her choices. He'd be damned if it was any of his concern whether she married a whoremonger, reprobate, or bore. Well, it would not be if not for one small thing—none of these gentlemen guaranteed her departure from London. In fact, if she married one of these men, she'd likely remain in the city where he'd be constantly reminded of a brutal time in his life whenever he caught a glimpse of her.

No, he would pen his own list of gentlemen for her. Ones that preferred to live on the outskirts of London or in the country, ones who were far better than the bunch of distasteful options on her list. Better yet, the less time the men spent in London, the better, though admittedly those men were few and far in between.

Granted, there was always the possibility that she would not take his list to heart, that she would curse him and toss him out on his rear when he presented it to her. He'd better come up with a plan to

dissuade her from her own list first then, which meant spending time in her presence.

Loathed as he was to do so, the end game was of much more importance than the little inconvenience now. Luckily her father, the Baron Berkeley, had chosen not to join his wife and daughter in town—Lucien had inquired the moment he'd departed the ballroom. While he loathed spending time in Miss Bakersfield's presence, he'd rather spend eternity shackled to a boulder with crows poking out his eyes than spend one moment in the same room as her potbellied father.

Chapter 3

The Earl of Craven wanted her gone, and try as she might, Ross could not cast that devilishly handsome, sinister face from her mind. Not even when she'd readied herself for bed did the images of their encounter abate, instead repeatedly flashing behind her closed eyes as she tried to fall asleep—an attempt that failed until the deep hours of the morning. To her further consternation, when her eyes had opened this morning she was greeted by the memory of his harsh features once again. It seemed she would receive no respite where the earl was concerned and it left her more than a trifle shaken, especially if she brought to mind those wicked blue eyes, which were so light they appeared icy.

“Oh dear.”

Ross's head lifted at her mother's soft note of distress and she tossed the book, which had failed to take her mind from the earl, aside.

“Is something amiss, mother?”

With another soft murmur of discomfort, her mother raised her gaze from the gossip rags she so delighted in and turned to Ross, her brows creasing together. “The Earl of Cromwell just married by way of special license.”

Ah, what a shame.

The quirky earl had made her list of marriageable gentlemen. She would now have to cross him off *if* she managed to find her scribblings.

“That is indeed unwelcome news,” Ross murmured. The earl would have made a fine husband. In fact, he'd been her first choice.

The baroness nodded her agreement. “You still have enough gentlemen to choose from, dear, each in their own right will make an acceptable husband,” her mother paused, her time-worn eyes darting

between the paper and Ross, "You can always replace the Earl of Cromwell with another earl."

"Another earl, mother? It took me a week to draw up the names of suitable and *eligible* gentlemen. There is no other earl."

Her mother gave her a sidelong glance. "Oh, I must have mistaken you in deep conversation with the Earl of Craven at the ball. I daresay he is handsome *and* unattached."

The observation shocked Ross. "Mother! Are you spying on me?" she exclaimed, concealing her jerk at the mention of the earl.

"Of course not, dear. I only want you to be happy and I'm just not certain these gentlemen you've chosen as prospects are right for you."

"Why ever not?" Ross asked, taken aback by her mother's sudden concern for her.

"Well dear, there is your lack of enthusiasm for one."

Ross paused when she would have answered, considering her mother's remark. Did she lack eagerness in her hunt for a husband? Perhaps. She craved companionship, indeed, but she wasn't necessarily enthusiastic and full of vigor in her search for it. But by Jove! Did that even matter?

Her mother had assisted in compiling the names and not once expressed reluctance for any of the gentlemen. Ross did not, however, point this out to her mother, for the baroness knew very well that she'd selected at least three of the names on that list in the first place. So why the sudden change of heart and why now?

She stared at her mother. Her mother, however, gazed off into the distance with a small smile. After a moment she said, "Marriage is not to be taken lightly and neither can it be undone. The men you've chosen are rather..."

Unremarkable?

That had been the point.

Hadn't it?

"...bland," her mother finished.

Ross linked her fingers together and leaned forward, pushing back the perfidious little whisper that agreed with her mother's counsel. "It is not as simple as that—"

"Do you still blame him for Alfred's death?" her mother interrupted her.

"Who? Craven?"

Is that what this is all about?

"Your father is as much to blame as anyone else is," her mother persisted.

That brought Ross up short. "How is father at fault? And I did hold the earl accountable for a time, but that is not why he is unsuitable as a husband. I believe his reputation speaks for itself."

Her mother made a soft, barely discernable sound, one which reminded Ross of all the other times her mother had expressed concern for her, which had been a lot. Far too many to count, in fact. Not that Ross was counting, but it had to be said, her mother loved her daughter dearly.

“It was one of your father’s conditions upon which the future marques could marry you—he had to enlist in the war. I suspect the earl followed Alfred to that godforsaken place.”

Ross felt the color drain from her face, which was bad since her freckles would now be rather visible, which in turn may remind her mother to scold her for failing to wear a bonnet yet again. But her mother wasn’t looking at her. Instead, she gazed down at her hands.

A tremor passed through Ross’s hands at the sudden unexpected news. “Why are you only telling me this now, mother?”

The older woman let out a heavy breath. “I only discovered the truth after Alfred’s death and by then I did not wish to burden you with the knowledge. You were so heartbroken.”

And she would have, in all likelihood, lashed out at her father.

The thing of it was, while the news shocked Ross, she had accepted a long time ago that Alfred’s death was no one’s fault, but rather an unfortunate circumstance. At the time, it had been easier to hold the Earl of Craven responsible instead of blaming Alfred for going to war in the first place. It saddened her that Alfred never told her of her father’s insistence on the matter. He could have made different choices, yet he had not. Mayhap he knew she would ask him to defy the baron’s request and if given the opportunity, he may have done so in a heartbeat. And Alfred was too honorable a gentleman for that. He wanted no part in causing any scandal. The banns were to be read, a church wedding to be had—all done properly by the book.

As for the Earl of Craven, though now painted as the heroic best friend, she found his rudeness was still very much unforgivable.

Her mother suddenly stood, “My, look at the time! I must be off to Lady Harrington. The old bird is expecting me for tea.”

Ross’s head whipped up, nonplussed before she spotted a looming figure standing in the door. She rose to her feet, glaring daggers at the intruder.

Garbed in a well-tailored great coat keeping the cold at bay, the Earl of Craven swept her a deep bow.

“Where is our butler?” she snapped.

He arched a mocking brow, as eyes the color of clear blue sky burned into her with alarming intensity. Her heart pounded in her ears, drumming out all other noise.

Honestly, did the devil have to be so handsome? She disliked everything about him. So why did she notice the fullness of his carnal-

looking mouth?

“Outside, hammering on the front door, I believe.”

Ross’s lips parted and closed again, at a loss for words. He smirked at her reaction, turning his attention to her mother.

“Madam, you are as lovely as ever. I do hope I’m not intruding.”

“Oh! Your charm is not exaggerated in the least, my lord.”

“Please, call me Lucien.”

Ross watched in bizarre fascination as her mother fell prey to the legendary rakish charm of the devil himself, blushing a glorious shade of crimson.

“And please call me Amelia...*Lucien*.”

At her mother’s velvety purr of the earl’s name, Ross threw her hands in the air and shot them both a sullen look. “If you two are quite done, I would like to get to the bottom of this uninvited visit.”

The earl had the nerve to chuckle as he returned to scrutinizing her. “Jealous, my dear?”

Her back straightened. “Not in the least and I’d thank you not to call me that.”

Her eyes shot past him. “Mother! Come back here at once!” she exclaimed when the baroness retreated from the room. But her wayward guardian had already disappeared, leaving the door slightly ajar.

“This is absurd,” she muttered, her eyes locking with his. From the mocking curve of his smile, she was fairly sure she had not been able to hide her flustered countenance at his presence in her home.

“Miss Bakersfield, I believe we are alone.”

His gaze swept over her once again, but this time instead of scrutiny, his gaze was filled with disdain, chilling her to the bone. Ross had half a mind to sew her lips shut instead of giving him the pleasure of her ire and still it took every ounce of her fortitude to remain composed. Did he mean to rile her with that ominous stare?

His eyes flicked to her hands, where she was twining and untwining her fingers. She stilled, watching as those icy glaciers rose and settled somewhere other than her gaze.

Was he peering at her lips?

“Your mother seems like quite the woman,” he murmured, lifting his eyes to hers once more.

She ignored his remark. “What an unexpected surprise, my lord. Have you come to demand I pack my belongings and leave?”

Not one to beat around the bush, it seemed, he produced a piece of white paper she recognized instantly.

Her list!

She snatched it from his fingers. “Where did you find this?”

And how did he know it was mine?

"I picked it from your pocket."

Her jaw slackened and she gaped at him. He seemed entirely unconcerned that he had violated her privacy. The arrogance! She tried to compare the hardened man standing before her to the cavalier rogue the gossip rags painted him to be, but it seemed impossible to imagine them being one in the same.

"You picked it from my pocket?" she sputtered, fury washing over her.

"I just said as much."

"How dare you presume to steal my property?"

But then she knew the answer already, didn't she? He'd said as much the previous night. He wanted her gone. It would appear by any means possible.

To her surprise, he chuckled and she could have sworn she saw a gleam of humor in the depth of his icy stare. "A piece of paper is hardly property, madam."

"It is still mine."

"And I still dared to pluck it from your skirts since you dared to insult not only my character but a dear friendship of mine...which, of course, brings me to the reason for my visit. I presume your little list is the names of the gentlemen you are considering for a husband?"

Ross's face flamed with anger.

"I thought as much. Unfortunately, none of them are worthy of you. I have—"

"I beg your pardon?" Ross interrupted, her shoulders stiffening at his gall even as her heart jolted over the fact that he believed them unworthy of her. "I'll have you know I devoted a week to prepare those names and the gentlemen are all above reproach!"

He leaned into her and Ross realized he was much closer than she first thought. So close, in fact, she could smell the faint scent of tobacco clinging to his jacket, feel the waft of his breath on her upturned face. Her tongue darted out in a nervous gesture.

"Those men are gamblers and whoremongers that leech from society and gently bred ladies. Or is that what you prefer these days?" he murmured, his voice silky smooth as his gaze dropped to her lips.

Ross was sorely tempted to shove him backward. This was beyond the pale, yet her pulse gave a fluttering leap.

He smelled deliciously wicked this close.

But how revoltingly arrogant he was!

And handsome.

And annoying.

So he was an annoyingly handsome arrogant man that smelled deliciously wicked.

If Ross had any sense at all, she'd bolt. This was not the time to

entertain female appreciation. In fact, a witty retort would come in handy right about now, but none came up to muster. She could feel her cheeks growing hot at his continued regard. His eyes burned with something she did not recognize; yet in their wake, they left a thrilling shiver of breathless anticipation.

She took a deep breath in an attempt to break free of whatever had come over her before she said, "As you have already gathered, I am indeed in search of a husband, and your disapproval of my prospects will not change the fact that I'm going to marry one of them. Honestly, I cannot conceive why you'd even take an interest in my plans, unless..." she paused, her eyes narrowing, "you are peeved that you did not make my list as a candidate?"

"I'd have to be mad, wouldn't I?" He held her gaze, his mask of calm reserve firmly in place as he continued, "But I find myself torn between assisting you in your endeavor and washing my hands of you."

"You wish to aid me?" Ross asked, unable to hide the skepticism in her tone.

"Or wash my hands of you. I'm still deciding."

His tone suggested he'd already made up his mind.

Ross crossed her arms over one another. "You have made your distaste at my presence abundantly clear, as have I regarding yours. Still you darken my doorway, so I will implore you once again to leave me be. I do not require your aid nor do I wish for your company, good intentions aside."

He shifted on his feet, those azure eyes stubborn to the core. "It was never an offer of assistance, Miss Bakersfield. Your choices will not do."

"I don't see how that has anything to do with—"

"The Earl of Cromwell—"

"Has married, I am well aware," she bit out.

He nodded and without so much as a care for her wishes, settled his big frame into the settee and leveled her with an expectant look.

Ah. There's the annoyingly arrogant man.

While unmistakable tension arced between them, Ross spared a glance at the door, deliberating if she could leave him and his infuriating look of expectancy on the settee. No, she concluded. If she ran off now, she'd betray how much he unsettled her. So she fought to reign in her scattered wits, taking a seat farthest away from him. Arranging her skirts neatly over her legs, she ignored his arched brow and opted to clear her expression of any strong emotion. Placid and composed, she allowed just a hint of annoyance to creep into her features. No need to reveal her deepening curiosity, or, well, her growing fondness for his woody tobacco scent.

“FitzWalter—why the hell did he make your list?”

Did the earl mean to go through each one of her choices? He certainly did not waste time with pleasantries. Ross pursed her lips together. Why, the Baron was the mildest on her list.

“Whatever is wrong with the baron? The man loves dogs. In fact, he owns six hounds *and* rescues abandoned animals, finding them loving homes.”

The earl’s lips curled in disgust. “Society has made FitzWalter into a saint.”

“Is he not one then?”

He studied her features, gauging for some reaction, she supposed. She kept her features impassive.

“In the battle of wills, Miss Bakersfield, you will lose.”

“The baron, my lord, you were saying?”

“I would not be surprised if he was the inspiration for the story *Frankenstein*.”

Frankenstein? The book? She’d never read the story herself but heard some accounts of it retold. It did not fit the baron at all. “I’m sure I don’t take your meaning, my lord.”

“He experiments on animals, Miss Bakersfield.”

“That cannot be.”

“Then there is Lord Mormont,” he continued, brushing aside her denial, “second son of the Duke of Sheffield and another poor choice. Lord Fitzherbert, another Fitz,” he shot her a look that spoke volumes of what he thought of the name, “cousin to the Marquis of Scarborough, both notorious gamblers, though for Fitzherbert gambling is the mildest of his transgressions.”

Gambling was hardly a cause for concern. All gentlemen dabbled in such exploits, Ross reflected. It seemed hardly cause for such dramatic intervention.

“The Viscount of Shaftesbury—now there’s a fellow that will do you wrong.”

Ross snorted. Shaftesbury was a darling.

“Let’s see...you’ve chosen Lord Buckley, as well. I believe he enjoys buxom young maids and opium for breakfast. Lord Lincoln on the other hand—”

“Is a painter and art connoisseur,” Ross interrupted, her voice soft with indignation.

“That he is,” Craven drawled. “He also prefers being pleased when creating his art.”

Her cheeks flushed at the wicked image that sprang to mind. Not from embarrassment, but from wonder. How did one go about pleasuring a gentleman while he painted? It seemed impossible. Ludicrous. In fact, all of the earl’s allegations seemed absurd. This

must be some trick of sorts, something Craven had up his sleeve. Retaliation for insulting him? She refused to believe every gentleman on her list was a hellion.

“And what of Lord Harry? Surely he is a model gentleman.”

Craven scoffed. “A known troublemaker, more like it.”

“That hardly constitutes a reason not to marry a man. By all accounts, one can argue *you* are a troublemaker, too. In fact, your presence here today, gossiping behind these gentlemen’s backs, is stirring the pot. For shame!”

The cynical lines of his mouth stretched into a grin. “Stating facts, but point taken. I, however, am not hunting for a wife.”

“Nevertheless, I cannot in good conscience be swayed from my choices by mere poppycock.”

“Poppycock? You would not take my word for it?”

She lifted her shoulder in a slight shrug. “I’d rather err on the side of caution than be off the mark and blunder over idle gossip.”

Craven’s countenance darkened, his sudden snarl almost giving him a feral appearance. “I do not gossip,” he said between clenched teeth. “But if you are worried that I have reduced your little list to naught, rest assured I’ve made my own list of gentlemen to consider for your quest.”

That brought Ross up short and she froze, every part of her body tensing.

He made a list? The utter gall of the man! “Excuse me?” she sputtered, jumping to her feet, hands on her hips, ready to challenge him.

He inclined his head, motioning for her to take a seat. So caught completely off guard by his calm veneer, not to mention his nerve, Ross sat down again.

“I’ve come up with a total of five gentlemen that should suit your needs adequately.”

Adequately?

“Professor Richard Chambers.”

“He is fifteen years older than me!” Ross exclaimed, her back straightening in affront.

“He is also a respected scholar at Oxford.”

“That hardly signifies.”

“Sir Royce Ecclestone—”

“He resides in Cambridge, does he not?”

“Yes, at the University.”

Ross narrowed her eyes on the man sitting across from her, suspicion blooming in her mind. He returned her stare impassively, his perfect angular jaw giving nothing of his emotions away. Not even those blue eyes revealed a clue as to what was going on in that thick

skull of his.

"I see. And who are the other three?"

So far he'd listed two scholars.

"Lord Fitzroy Hammington."

"Another Fitz?" she shot his earlier words back at him, which he ignored, so she continued her observation, "Brighton. Agricultural interest, if I'm not mistaken."

"The Marquis of Huntly."

"Leicester."

"Lord William Lawrence."

"York."

He stared at her, unblinkingly.

His list held arguably three scholars, definitely two lords, and for certain a marquis, but every single one of them resided in the country for most of the year, if not permanently. Marriage to any of them meant being away from London.

This cannot be happening!

Ross stood again, suddenly not in the mood for entertaining Craven and his preposterous wild notions anymore. He stood as well, interpreting her sudden mood correctly and without comment. And why would he comment? The man had said his piece, though it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"My Lord, I thank you for your concern, but I will manage just fine in selecting my future husband."

His brows drew together in a scowl. "Your choices are bad ones."

Ross considered him. What she had first believed to be arrogance, she now recognized as perplexity. He could not fathom why she would still consider her own choices after he had informed her they were not worthy and certainly not after he'd handed her his carefully crafted list of stuffy gentlemen.

"So you say, but the truth is, you know not a thing about me, my lord. Yet you deign to craft a list of persons you believe will suit my needs."

Suddenly he stood before her, his body inches away from her, his scent overpowering her senses. Then he leaned closer still, his mouth almost touching her ear.

"I know you enjoy a cup of warm milk with a dash of honey before you retire for the night. I know you hate to wear bonnets because you feel constricted. I know you adore animals but your mother is susceptible to sneezing fits whenever around the creatures. I know you are partial to Great Danes and the name Peter the Great. I know that you did own a Great Dane named Peter the Great because you gifted him to Alfred, and, upon his death, the beloved creature came to me."

Ross's jaw had gone slack again as Craven imparted intimate facts

about her, but it snapped shut at the mention of Peter the Great. "Peter the Great is with *you*? I've been enquiring after him for two years and no one has ever told me what happened to him!" Her hands lifted to rest on her hips, her eyes peering up at him. "And just how do you know those things about me?"

He lifted a well-defined brow.

Of course. Alfred.

"I want Peter the Great back."

"No."

"He is my hound!"

"Then why did Alfred leave him to me?"

Ross reeled. "He left him to you in his will? He had no right to do that!"

"He had every right; it was his dog."

"Which I gave him!"

"Yes, you gave him Pete as a gift, which meant it was his dog to give away to whomever he desired."

"His name is not Pete and I gave him that dog for us. It was meant to be *our* dog."

He seemed unperturbed by her outburst, waiving her comment aside with the flick of his hand, eyes narrowing. "Then you should not have gifted Pete away, but rather loaned the dog to him."

"You cannot loan a dog!" She shook her head, unwilling to argue the matter any further. "The subject is closed for debate. I want him back."

"Miss Bakersfield, I have the papers to prove Pete is mine."

Ross bristled. "We shall see about that. In the meantime, I would prefer it you refrain from meddling in my affairs."

Amusement entered his gaze. "Very well, but on one condition."

"You are in no place to demand conditions."

"You can choose whoever pleases you for a husband *after* I unmask their true characters."

"What do you mean?" she snapped.

"You do not believe my claims, that much is clear. I will prove my assertions. After you have seen each gentleman on your list for what he is, if you still wish to marry one of them, I will wash my hands of the matter."

"And if I refuse?"

He appeared unconcerned by that prospect. "Then I'll refuse you any contact with Pete."

Ross gasped, her eyes rounding before they narrowed on him. "I did not say I wished to see him."

He said nothing, only smirked.

"This is ridiculous! You would threaten me into submission with my

own dog?"

"If it works, then yes."

"You are a deplorable human being!"

"I've been called much worse."

Ross glared up at him. Damn the man for knowing which buttons to push. And damn him for intoxicating her senses and addling her wits. She would not be surprised if this were his plan all along, to coerce her with her Peter the Great.

"Did you know I asked after him?"

He shook his head. "Had I known, I would have sent word."

"And I am to believe this?"

"Miss Bakersfield, if you believe nothing else, believe that I am a man of my word."

Ross's shoulders relaxed, somewhat. She wanted to scoff and brush his words aside as hogwash, but soon enough the truth would be revealed. She would determine for herself whether his words held any honor.

"Fine, but know I intend to get Peter the Great back."

"You are more than welcome to try."

Chapter 4

Lucien entered Whites in a foul mood. *What the hell am I doing here?* Not for the first time, he mulled over the question as he took a seat in the far corner of the room.

Regarding the occupants with a mixture of detachment and disdain, he reflected once again how Whites made him feel like an imposter. He had killed too many men to not feel like a beast in a gentleman's skin. The fact that he had done so in the name of his country did not lessen the sting of the deed. He did not belong here, in this plush decorated room, with these pampered gentlemen. They reminded him of all he had lost in the war.

He should never have come, but the walls of his home had closed in on him and he desired a reprieve.

He had fallen asleep with the lovely face of Miss Bakersfield on his mind, only to be awakened by something pressing down hard against his chest. His suffocation had drawn him away from his bewitching dreams of the green-eyed creature and he'd opened his eyes to stare into Pete's golden ones. Damn dog nearly killed him with his sheer size as he sprawled quite happily over Lucien's body. Yet another reminder of *her*.

These past two years had done nothing to diminish her beauty or her temper. Every time she spoke, he found his gaze drawn to her lips, as the hypnotic notes of her voice cast a spell on him. The woman could drive a saint mad.

And that, right there, was the cause of his foul mood. Why did he even indulge in thoughts of her beauty and her temper? That was something a man did when he was interested in a lady. And Lucien was *not* interested in Miss Rosslyn Bakersfield.

He had done the minx a favor by compiling a list and she'd

dismissed every name he'd penned down. Admittedly he'd done himself more favor with his selections, yet his suggestions were all honorable gentlemen nonetheless. Hell, her list consisted of a collection of wretched bastards—with the exception of Lord Harry.

He might just be the only man that could come up to scratch which, for some unexplainable reason, raised Lucien's hackles. What did he even know of the man? Other than that Lord Harry was the youngest gentleman she'd selected and was no rake. The man was a handsome fellow, tall, lean, and always so damn charming. He was also a cousin of the Duke of St. Ives and had no known gambling habits, drinking tendencies, destitution of any kind, or indicators that he may be a scoundrel.

No one was that perfect.

Except, it seemed, Lord Harry Spencer.

But to Craven's knowledge, perfection equaled boredom. However, Lord Harry appeared to be anything but, which meant, at least to Lucien, the man possessed secrets. And who better than Lucien to ferret out the skeletons of London's most charming gentleman?

"Craven, what brings you to this respectable establishment?"

He cursed his luck. Simon Tremaine, the Earl of Westfield, plopped down on a chair, one hand holding two tumblers and the other a bottle of whiskey.

"The respectable part," he muttered.

Westfield chuckled, filling their glasses. "Don't mind if I join you, then."

Lucien swore, in no mood for company. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed with your wife?"

When Westfield's cheeks colored, Lucien tilted his head to the side. "Wife tossed you out of the bedchamber, eh?"

"I may have commented on her weight."

Lucien released a low whistle and for the first time that evening a smile stretched across his lips, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "I never could tell whether you are brave or foolish. I suppose I have my answer now."

"Sod off, I may be your only friend."

One corner of his mouth twisted cynically.

Lucien suffered no delusions. To the majority of the ton, he was a notorious rake and he played the part to perfection, keeping everyone at an acceptable distance. Never mind that the rumors had been exaggerated to the point of being laughable. The ruse served its purpose. Since Alfred had died, he had known no real friends, only people who'd rather not find themselves on his vengeful side. But now, it appeared a handful of those people, Westfield included, were insisting on calling themselves his friend, much to his chagrin.

"If you are my only friend, more pity to you."

"Have you not heard? I have a penchant for taking in strays."

Lucien snorted. "I'm sure your wife will appreciate that comment."

Westfield visibly flinched, slanting him a sidelong glance. "Seems to me you have sorrows in need of drowning."

Green-eyed sorrows.

"My sorrows have long since learned how to swim," Lucien drawled, taking a swig of his glass, "and, if you must know, sleep proved a cruel mistress tonight."

Westfield nodded and they lapsed into a comfortable silence, each observing the drunken revelry before them.

"What do you know of Lord Harry Spencer?" Lucien asked after a moment, taking another nip of his tumbler.

Westfield arched a blond brow but replied nonetheless. "Affable fellow, ladies find him pleasant."

No help whatsoever.

He could feel his face instantly harden in displeasure even as his gut clenched with bitterness. He threw the whiskey down his throat and refilled his glass.

"What did the pup do to cause this magnificent display of annoyance?"

"He breathes."

The darkly muttered words only served to amuse his companion further and Lucien leveled him with a glare.

"What?" Westfield exclaimed with a chuckle. "You asked me and I told you the truth."

Aware of the overwhelming frustration that had overtaken his sense, Lucien cursed. He could feel a muscle ticking away in his jaw. He should have known better than to ask Westfield for information. The man was a champion of the happy folk and considered one of their brethren.

Abruptly he stood, shaking his head. Allowing a mask of stone to fall over his face, he muttered, "Best of luck with your wife," before he stalked away, leaving Westfield looking at him with startled confusion.

He shrugged his stiff shoulders, his cravat too tight around his neck. Another reminder of how out of place he felt. And that, right there, was the crux of his situation. Lucien had forgotten how to be a gentleman when nothing about him felt gentle anymore. He only hoped he possessed enough control to pretend otherwise.

Whenever Rosslyn Bakersfield felt the stirring of anger, she turned to the outdoors. Her mother would say that her freckles were a testament to her impatience, an impatience that usually resulted in her losing

her temper, and her mother would be right. And she felt that impatience now as she stood in the drawing room, watching the rain clatter against the window. Patience had never been one of her virtues.

When she'd met Alfred all those years ago, his presence had been a balm to her otherwise temperamental soul. His soothing presence had been what had drawn her to him, like a bee attracted to the harmonious sweetness of a flower. There was nothing wild about him, unlike his ferociously untamed friend.

Even so, Rosslyn had never met Craven before the day he'd arrived on her doorstep, destroying her world with the news he carried from abroad. She hadn't thought it strange at the time, but now she wondered why Alfred had never introduced them before he went off to war. They were arguably the two people that meant the most to him and he had kept them apart. Now Alfred was gone and the earl out and about, determined to be stubborn.

Her mother, on the other hand, had some explaining to do. She apparently believed Rosslyn's life to be a theatrical play, one where she'd fall madly in love with Alfred's wickedly handsome friend, thus relieving her mother from any guilt she may feel for her father's part in her fiancé's death.

Ross curled her fingers into a small fist. And just what would her father say about his dear wife inviting that Lothario into his home? Not that Rosslyn planned to inform him. No, it was best she manage her mother on her own. Her father may just encourage the match, in any case, what with Craven being an earl and all. The Seventh Baron Berkeley would be thrilled to see his daughter wed an earl. After all, it would cultivate higher family connections.

Still, something nagged at the back of her mind. Why would her father insist that the heir to a marquis join the war? It seemed strange. Though what was done could not now be undone, so perhaps mulling over it was pointless.

As a child, Ross could not wait to fall in love and marry the perfect gentleman. She even envisioned what the perfect gentleman would be like. He would complement her in every way. He'd be caring and compassionate with a deep sense of honor. Fiercely loyal, he'd be her champion in every regard, and he'd adore animals.

Then she had found her perfect gentleman in Alfred. Everything she'd ever wanted had fallen into her lap with no effort, no trials, and no disappointment, and she'd taken all she'd received for granted, believing it her right to be so fortunate.

When Alfred died and Ross thought her world nothing more than crumbling dust, she believed she'd never recover. Then she had. But something of herself had died with him, along with any desire to fall

in love again. She still wished to marry, but it needn't be to someone spectacular, just someone with who she could share a comfortable life.

And now the earl had resurfaced, meddling in her affairs, and left her in a state of confusion and at a loss of what to do. Curse his handsome hide! And he was handsome. One look at his face and she remembered all of her childhood dreams. The fact that he was a far cry from her perfect gentleman seemed no deterrent. Something inside her sparked every time she overheard his name spoken. And each time those blue eyes bored into her, they effortlessly weakened her restraint.

But this thing, this spark, had never flared to life when she looked upon her beloved Alfred or at the utterance of his name, which alarmed her greatly. It brought into question her very heart.

This glimmer, this stirring inside her, it ran deeper than a mere flutter of expectation and was exceptionally hard to explain. The closest she had come to understand it was imagining it to be a creature who'd been in a long, wintry slumber when an unexpected noise had stirred it awake. The noise made it just curious enough to lift its head and gaze into the unknown with avid interest.

That did not mean the noise was a good thing.

Neither did she sense it to be a bad thing.

It did, however, give rise to the conclusion that it would be best to stay as far away from Craven as possible.

Can I, though, considering his insistence to "unmask" the true characters of my potential spouses?

Ross had spent the entire night devising plots to purge him of her life, steal back her dog, and marry, all before he became the wiser. Not one good idea had come to mind.

She also hadn't been able to escape the truth, that even while she wished to stay as far away from the earl as possible, the stirring within her did not. *It*, as she'd come to refer to it, wanted him to reveal the true characters of the men she'd chosen. *It* felt flattered by his concern. *It* harbored a warped sense of attraction to him. Ross, on the other hand, knew quite well that his interfering meant he wished her gone from London posthaste. *It*, unfortunately, did not want to listen to reason.

Her mother entered the room in a lofty stride, drawing Ross's attention away from the window. Firmly shoving thoughts of the earl from her mind, she turned, her hands lifting to rest on her hips as her eyes narrowed on her mother's plump form.

"Why you look quite peeved, dear. How did the visit with the earl go yesterday? Such a charming man, that," she murmured in a much-too-innocent voice.

Ross shot her mother, who had been noticeably absent until that

moment, a look. "Unless you are referring to another earl, he is not a charming man. Not to mention, it was unmotherly of you to leave me alone with that reprobate!"

Her mother took a seat, unconcerned by her daughter's outburst. "Must you always be so gloom-ridden, dear? Come, let us enjoy a cup of tea. Everything is always better..."

After a cup of tea, Rosslyn mouthed into the air.

"...after a cup of tea."

"I am not gloom-ridden, mother," she paused when the footman suddenly appeared with a tray of tea and biscuits and waited for him to depart before continuing, "This plotting is diabolical, even for you."

"Do not be silly, Rosslyn. I did not plan for him to call on you."

"Yet you suspected he might?"

"Of course. I saw him ogling you at the ball before he approached you—real predatory, that one."

"Mother!"

"Do not be such a girl, Rosslyn. One can appreciate a fine man at all ages and the earl has clearly set his sights on you."

If only her mother knew. The earl despised her, and she him.

"I can assure you, mother, he has not set his cap on me. Have you even heard the rumors surrounding him?"

"Utter rubbish. Your Alfred would never have befriended the man those rumors imply."

"Then why would they mouth such claims in the first place?"

Her mother considered that, sipping her tea in thought. Finally, ever wise, she murmured, "The earl has never shown any interest in procuring a wife. It is only natural to conclude then that he is a rake. Why I even heard Lady Isobel Herring claim she had a torrid affair with the man, but that is utter rubbish as well, considering that she looks like a fish and her arms are as big as trees!"

Her mother made a solid point.

But it was still beside the *point*.

"Needless to say, I am not interested in him. Honestly, I do not understand why you favor the earl so much. You never mentioned him as a consideration for my list."

Her mother's expression softened as she regarded her though kind, loving eyes. "Rosslyn dear, your list represents your willingness to finally move on and while that has made me happy, I do not wish for you to limit yourself to six or seven gentlemen. You have the opportunity to choose wisely. I would hate to see you married to a man you thought would suit, but who did not, causing you to spend your life in discontent."

"What of you and father?"

Her mother scoffed. "Ours was an arranged marriage. I had to make

do with what I was given.”

Ross’s throat constricted. She’d never thought about under what circumstances her parents had married or whether they were happy. “That’s just horrible.”

Her mother shrugged. “It was what it was. You, on the other hand, have the privilege to marry a man of your own choosing. I’d caution you to choose that person with care.”

Ross paused. “Do you know why father insisted Alfred join the war?”

The baroness shook her head, a sad glint entering her eyes. “Your father does not discuss such matters with me.”

Hard conviction set in Ross’s heart, then. Whatever happened, she did not wish to marry a man like her father, and if that meant embracing Craven’s offer with a broad smile, then that was what she’d do. She would allow Craven to go about his unmasking, then marry the perfect gentleman and steal Peter the Great back.

Decided, she wondered where to start.

“Mother, how well do you know Lord Shaftesbury?”

Chapter 5

The following evening Lucien arrived at the Charleston musical at precisely five minutes past eight. He was the fifth person to arrive, and likely the only person to attend uninvited. It hadn't escaped his notice that the hostess's eyes had widened upon his arrival, but she'd smartly refrained from pointing out his intrusion, and he, in return, had not voiced her lack of foresight in failing to invite him.

So she accepted what was and he accepted what was not, knowing that she and many others did not feel any heartfelt enjoyment at his presence. Not that he cared one ounce whether his hostess wanted him there or elsewhere. Though to her credit, even under other circumstances, and even if he had been invited, he'd have sent his apologies. He did not possess the stomach for the false notes that often rung out at musicals.

But tonight was no ordinary night. He was on the hunt, making him every mother's nightmare.

Though, not Miss Bakersfield's mother. No, in fact, it had been the exuberant baroness who had informed him of her daughter's plans for the night in a neatly penned missive that arrived at his apartment earlier that day.

If Lucien did not know better, he'd suspect the baroness was attempting to broker a relationship between her daughter and himself. He'd suspect her of matchmaking if it weren't for the guilt he'd glimpsed in the older woman's eyes when he called upon Miss Bakersfield. It appeared that she was aware of her husband's indiscretion, or at least that he had been the reason Alfred joined the war. However, Baron Berkeley must not have mentioned the unfortunate run-in between them after Alfred's death or the baroness might never have been so friendly towards him. But that was two

years ago, and for some, that was a lifetime.

In any case, Lucien certainly did not blame her or her daughter. They only served as a reminder of the bastard baron, who he did indeed blame for his friend's death. Still, the choice to humor such a ludicrous demand had been Alfred's. Lucien had known his best friend better than anyone. Aware that once Alfred decided on a course, a direction, or his choice of brandy, nothing could sway him.

Devil take it, he missed the scoundrel.

Alfred should never have come after Lucien in enemy territory. He should have considered his fiancée, the unexpectedly lovely Miss Bakersfield. The idiot should have thought of *his* life.

Lucien wanted Miss Bakersfield gone, or at least that's what he'd told himself when he first glimpsed her in the crowd. But deep in his gut, he'd suspected—no *known*—the only reason for her return was to finally move on, which for some reason, annoyed him.

He hadn't meant to meddle in her affairs though, or perhaps he had. A moot point now. Besides, upon reading the list of names she'd chosen, he'd seen it as his duty to rescue her from making a poor choice. None of those names came up to scratch, regardless of the fact that no man alive would ever live up to the man Alfred had been.

Not even Lucien.

Sodding bastard.

Lucien hadn't forgiven him for dying and leaving him behind with nothing but guilt. That being said, it seemed, at least to Lucien, that too much guilt now impeded the once-lively gentlewomen of the Bakersfield household. And perhaps, just maybe, he'd absolve himself and them from that guilt if he aided Miss Bakersfield in finding a perfectly adequate husband.

Adequate. He despised the word, which was as unremarkable as the meaning itself, and seemed wrong to use as a marker for Miss Bakersfield's search.

The hostess cast a sidelong glance his way.

Cursing under his breath, he paced away from her in search of something to drink. He did not belong here, which was clear both to the attendees and in his own mind.

He schooled his expression to that of natural charm. When a young girl in a pretty yellow dress scampered out of his way, he rather imagined he'd failed in his attempt. No doubt everyone would speculate the reason for his attendance for days to come.

He should have discovered at what time Miss Bakersfield would attend. Being here this early only put him on display longer than necessary. Of course, he was more than used to being the object of speculation. It had been that way ever since he returned battle-weary, wounded, and buried in guilt after the war.

Upon his return, he had withdrawn from the world, then made two poor choices in lovers, and soon enough his newfound reputation had formed. He embraced the rumors that only a true libertine would covet in the interest of keeping the world at bay. Now, once again, inquisitive eyes prompted a snarl from his lips, which also worked to keep polite company at a distance.

She arrived exactly one hour after him. An hour of roaming about in boredom and keeping to himself. Clad in a simple, elegant gown of soft pink, which softened the freckles visible on her cheeks, she displayed the picture of confidence. He spotted her instantly. A flower amongst a crowd weeds, her unique beauty eclipsed most ladies' present. By her side stood her mother and—

A vile curse escaped his lips.

Lord Shaftesbury.

A tall, well-built, pleasant man with dark hair that reached just above his collar, Lord Shaftesbury made for an impressive figure. Lucien understood why the man had made Miss Bakersfield's list and had to give him credit. If not for the man's proclivities, he might have made the perfect husband.

He watched as the young lord, four years his junior at the age of twenty-eight, ushered her to a seat from where they would watch the musical. The baroness followed at a more leisurely pace, waylaid by a flock of mother hens.

Lucien pushed himself away from the wall and ambled toward the saucy little wench. The crowd had thickened in the hour since he arrived and while he remained the recipient of quizzical stares, most had turned their attention elsewhere.

With a fluid, graceful motion, he took the open seat on her other side with his first genuine smile that night.

He expected her startled gaze to dart to him in surprise. Instead, she tilted her head to the side, her smile serene and her face utterly composed. He did not question the sudden escalation in his heartbeat when her emerald eyes locked with his, only accepted it as part of his attraction to her.

"Miss Bakersfield," he said in acknowledgment.

"My lord," she murmured with a hint of amusement. "Dare I enquire your motivation for attendance?"

"The musical, of course. Is that not why you are present?"

"You hate musicals," she pointed out.

"Wherever did you gather that notion?"

"Have you ever attended a musical before tonight?"

"Christ no."

Lord Shaftesbury leaned forward then, giving them both a searching look but said nothing other than, "Craven," as he acknowledged him

with a faint smile.

“Shaftesbury.”

Miss Bakersfield now sat ramrod straight, her gaze angled to the front, apparently refusing to engage in further conversation with him after the reminder of Shaftesbury’s presence.

Lucien tried to keep from laughing, but a throaty chuckle escaped him nonetheless. He felt her jerk beside him. Deliberately, he shifted his much bigger form so that his knee touched her leg, and her small gasp drew a broader smile from his lips.

This caught Shaftesbury’s attention and he examined her features with care. “Miss Bakersfield, are you quite all right?”

“Yes, quite all right,” she croaked.

“Perhaps I can retrieve some refreshment for you?” Lord Shaftesbury suggested.

Lucien almost snorted. Shaftesbury’s gaze hadn’t strayed far from the refreshment table since his arrival.

“Please, my lord, if you wouldn’t mind. I am feeling a bit parched.”

“Not in the least, my dear. I will retrieve a glass of Madeira for your thirst.”

Lucien said nothing as Shaftesbury rose and swiftly made his way to the refreshments. When the man was well out of earshot, he leaned closer to Miss Bakersfield, murmuring, “I thought he’d never leave.”

Her eyes shot to him and narrowed with suspicion. “I’m sure you would have found a way to send him off,” she said in an equally hushed tone.

One brow arched at that. “Do not give me so much credit, my dear. Shaftesbury would have found a way all on his own,” he drawled, his face the picture of innocence.

She shook her head as if to clear it. “Are you following me?”

“That depends on whether you are heading off to some place indecently improper?”

“You are reprehensible.”

“I’ve been called much worse.”

“Yet you are here,” she pointed out, “amongst the proper.”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” he declared. “Besides, someone must save you from Shaftesbury.”

“It appears the only man I am in need of saving from is you,” she retorted indignantly.

“Do you know,” Lucien continued, paying no attention to her statement, “that Shaftesbury has the word *shaft* in it?”

Her lovely brows furrowed, attempting to decipher where exactly his nugget of information would lead.

Lucien suppressed a smile.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.” she said after a

moment, apparently having come to no concrete conclusion.

"The word 'shaft' is another word for a male's member."

"A member of what?" she snapped with impatience.

Lucien nearly did laugh then. "The *male* body."

She shook her head at a complete loss. "I still do not follow, what member of a man's body can possibly be called a..." She paused, her brows furrowing once more.

"If you prefer I explain the male anatomy—"

"I get it!" she exclaimed as understanding dawned, her cheeks coloring bright red. "How utterly indecent of you to point it out and blast it, now you have gone and ruined Lord Shaf...bury for me."

"Just as well," Lucien murmured, motioning over to Shaftesbury, who was now deep in conversation with another young gentleman.

He watched as Miss Bakersfield's gaze traveled to where the men stood, her eyes widening as her gaze dropped to *that* part, only to discover that the slight bulge was notable even from where they were sitting. Lucien knew that certainly hadn't happened in *her* company.

Her annoyed expression changed to shock. "Mother Mary," she murmured, her voice echoing her disbelief.

"I for one would hate to call you Lady *Shaftesbury*."

Green gems bore into him, blazing with heat. "Are you happy now?"

Lucien gave her his most charming smile. "Ecstatic. Now you must excuse me; I have no stomach for these tedious events."

She gasped before latching her slender fingers around his much bigger wrist. Her touch burned right through the layers of fabric, blasting a wave of heat over his skin.

"You cannot leave now. I assume by the dark looks our hostess is sending our way that you were not only presumptuous in attending but that you have singled me out. To depart now will cause suspicion."

Lucien regarded her through hooded eyes, taking note of every single freckle on her face as she spoke. He quite liked them, he'd decided. He found them fascinating and wanted to discover what else she secreted away from his eyes. She stirred something within him, something elusive and volatile. He *wanted*. And he never wanted.

Struggling to maintain a stoic expression, he reached out and captured her wrist, yanking it away from his own before standing. "My apologies, Miss Bakersfield. I am confident our conversing will not be misconstrued, given our mutual acquaintance."

At his coolly remote tone, her eyes narrowed. He pivoted on his heel, feeling her gaze boring into his back as he walked away. He felt a twinge at leaving her seated alone, but, just in time, he noted that Shaftesbury was making his way back to his seat.

Lucien prided himself on not being a complete monster, so he'd remain long enough to draw whatever speculation might arise away from them.

A low, feral growl rumbled deep from within his chest, causing two young chits to jump away from him in fright. Damned if he knew what the hell was going on inside him. This maddening spell of want and desire was too entangled and thorny to unravel. Best to lock it away entirely, he reflected bitterly, and divert his attention to another name on her list.

Rosslyn's eyes remained on Craven's back as he took his leave, his posture as rigid as her own. His mood had gone from wry amusement to frosty so suddenly it had caught her off guard—and sparked her temper. Taking a deep breath, she gathered the tattered threads of her composure. She nearly sighed when she spotted Lord Shaftesbury making his way back, now flinching at the thought of his name.

So the lord's wife hunting expedition was only to keep up appearances, Ross mused. She had heard of such proclivities before but hadn't believed it. How would two gentlemen go about joining together? Well, apparently, there were ways.

What had Craven said of him? That he was a fellow that would do her wrong?

Yes, it seemed indeed he would.

Of course, there existed worse gentlemen than Lord S. While she did not require a passionate man, she did wish to be content, happy. And as much as she hated to admit it, and as much as a darling Lord S appeared to be, she could never be content with a man that constantly yearned to be with another.

Still. Curse Craven for his meddling.

How would he go about spoiling the next gentleman for her? In some dastardly fashion, no doubt.

Ross harbored no delusions that he would delight in showing her exactly how unmarriageable her choices were.

What had possessed her to agree to this madness? No man could claim perfection. Then of course, how many ladies were presented with the chance to glimpse any of their imperfections before tying themselves to the man for life?

At that moment, as if to reinforce her impression that she did not know Craven at all, he was approached by a striking young woman with dark hair, her body adorned in the most exotic gown Ross had ever seen. The woman beamed up at Craven and his lips lifted into a broad smile in return.

She watched as the woman looped her arm around his—making Ross instantly dislike her. The teasing light in the beauty's eyes was

visible even from a distance. Was she a lover? His mistress?

A foreign feeling rose up to choke Ross, but just then a large man with a fierce scowl suddenly loomed over the woman, yanking her away from Craven. The woman laughed merrily, swatting the big man, and murmuring something Ross could only deduce as a playful reprimand.

Ross's shoulders relaxed.

Lord S arrived and took his seat next to her again, handing her a glass of Madeira. Murmuring her thanks, she pointed to Craven's friends. "Who is that couple with the earl?"

He craned his neck to follow her gaze. "That is the Marquis of St. Aldwyn and his Marchioness, though she prefers the simpler 'Lady Josephine' to the title some say."

Her brows furrowed. "Sister to the Marquis of Warton?"

"That would be correct."

"How on earth did those two get together?" she wondered aloud.

And how on earth did they become friends with Craven? The earl seemed quite fond of them, despite the dark countenance of the marquis.

Lord S shrugged beside her. "Stranger things have happened."

"Indeed," she murmured, an overwhelming sense of fascination rooting in her heart.

Had everyone been wrong about Craven? Had she been too harsh on him?

Another couple approached them, both blond and splendidly smashing together. The lady was clad in another beautiful low-cut gown and she smiled just as coyly up at Craven. Her partner, in contrast to St. Aldwyn, greeted the earl with a warm and welcoming smile, clapping him on the shoulder.

"The Earl of Westfield and his wife, the Countess of Westfield, who again many know simply as 'Lady Belle,'" Lord S murmured from her side.

Another impressive match.

Powerful friends.

Her companion nodded and Ross blinked. She hadn't even noticed she had expressed her opinion out loud. They were quite the eye-catching group, though.

"The Earl of Grey and his Countess, Lady Evelyn, are in the country, or else they would have made up their party."

Ross had heard stories of the earl, but none worth repeating. It would seem Craven had done well for himself, making friends with an interesting set of individuals.

She'd also heard rumors of the three ladies now that she thought of it. They'd been spinsters, all determined to cut their own path through

life, and perhaps they had—though now they were married to powerful men instead of on the shelf.

“How long have they all been friends?” Ross asked, unable to help herself. She wanted to discover all of Craven’s secrets.

“Who can say? They have been familiar since he arrived in London.”

Familiar.

Friends.

It appeared she had underestimated the earl’s position in society. And what did that make them? *Given our mutual acquaintance*, he’d said. Not familiar, not friends, and not acquaintances, then, just a *mutual* connection. Nothing between them, themselves.

Her companion glanced at his pocket watch, distracting her from her rumination.

“The musical should start right about now.”

Ross settled into her seat, resisting the urge to peek over to where Craven still conversed with his friends, as the harmony of the violins and piano flooded the room and her entire being with comfort and warmth.

She spared Lord S a lingering glance. His whole comportment was without flaw, and she wondered what life for him must be like, constantly pretending to be somebody he did not care to be, living a life he did not care to live.

Chapter 6

Aubrey Plumptre, the Right Honorable Lord FitzWalter, was a tall, wiry man, who possessed the biggest heart Rosslyn had ever encountered. And now, the suspiciously honorable Craven was about to dash her perceptions—or at least he had every intention of trying. But Ross remained resolved to keep an open mind this time, refusing to be nettled so easily.

When she first encountered the Baron three years ago, he had owned over fifteen dogs. The man's love for animals had always endeared him to her and she often delighted in reading about his latest exploits in the *Times*. The titles would read:

The Admirable Baron FitzWalter Saved Admirable John Keaton's Hound from Imminent Death;

The Noble Baron FitzWalter Adopted Three Baby Kittens After Rescuing Them from the Knavish Clutches of a Butcher;

The Distinguished Baron FitzWalter Extinguished the Flames That Broke Out on a Vessel Carrying Imported Persian Cats; or her personal favorite

The Downright Honorable Baron FitzWalter Has Done It Again.

Simple. To the point. He had done it again.

She dared not believe Craven and his claims of FitzWalter inspiring *Frankenstein*, whatever that even meant. Of course, she had heard about the story of *Frankenstein*, but only in passing. From what she'd gathered, it apparently told the tale of a young scientist who created a monstrous creature. Presumably, the story was quite grotesque. And if that was the case, whatever did it have to do with her Downright Honorable Baron FitzWalter?

Earlier that very day, exactly twelve hours after she'd spoken to the earl at the musical, Craven sent a missive for her to be ready at promptly eleven o'clock that night if she wanted to learn the truth

about FitzWalter. At first, she had written a scathing reply on how inappropriate it would be to sneak out of her home for an assignation with him, however educating it may be. But after some reflection on the matter, deep curiosity had set in and she had decided against sending a reply. What could he possibly show her of FitzWalter that would make her cross his name off her list?

Lord S had been a forgone conclusion. She would not marry a man who was not even attracted to women. However, she remained unconvinced that habits like gambling or debauchery should be the sole reason she crossed names off her list. These men were unmarried and therefore could do as they pleased. There was no reason for them not to go about their vices.

She told herself that her curiosity was the only reason she now slipped through the front entrance of her home and briskly walked a few feet down the street, where a carriage waited in the shadows. It had started to rain about an hour ago and the night air chilled her to her bones. Not even her gloves did the trick to keep the cold at bay.

With a shivering sigh, she entered the carriage, glad to be shielded from the weather.

“Miss Bakersfield.” Craven’s gruff voice immediately warmed her insides.

“My Lord,” she murmured, surprised when he then covered her with a soft blanket and crossed to her side of the carriage, planting himself tightly against her person. She attempted to scoot away, only to be anchored to his side by a strong arm.

“You are freezing,” he said by way of explanation.

After a moment of debate, she nodded, deciding it well worth the trouble to take advantage of his heat.

“You chose a damnable night for your unveiling.”

He raised a brow at her unladylike use of words. “FitzWalter doesn’t leave his home often, but I have it on good authority he will be gone for at least four hours.”

Ross thought it best not to ask how he knew that.

The carriage jolted forward, bringing her even closer him. He did not remark on it and neither did he appear affected by her proximity.

Struggling to remain unaffected, she exhaled a whisper of a breath and searched for her inner calm. His intoxicating scent did not make the task easy. While grateful for his warmth, the way his body was kneading against hers with every rock of the carriage wreaked havoc with her senses. She’d been close to a man before, but never this close—not even with Alfred, who had been a gentleman to the very end.

Craven, on the other hand, was no gentleman. He was fierce. Dangerous. Sin.

Her body trembled with awareness.

“Bloody hell woman,” he growled, already shrugging out of his coat. He removed her blanket just long enough to cover her in his richly scented jacket before replacing the soft material.

“You will freeze to death without your coat!” she exclaimed.

He snorted. “I am a man.”

“Does that make you invincible?”

He shrugged. “Invincible enough.”

Ross shook her head, too cold and flustered to fight him on this. If he wished to perish from the cold, that was his choice.

A moment later, the carriage started to slow before it lurched to a complete halt.

“We’re here.”

“I got that,” Ross said, rather snippily.

He arched a brow but said nothing.

A cold wind rushed into the small space as he flung open the door and jumped out, holding out his hand. With only the slightest bit of hesitation, she placed her palm in his hand. To her chagrin, when his fingers closed over hers, he yanked her to his chest.

“What is the matter with you, unhand me!” she hissed.

He smiled down at her. “It’s cold. I will keep you warm.”

She struggled, fighting out of his embrace. “I will walk, thank you very much.”

He released her, setting her down on her feet with a low chuckle.

“Very well, this way.”

He led her across the street and down an alley behind FitzWalter’s townhouse. No candle light flickered through the window, leaving the house shrouded in darkness. Ross remained on alert, not certain what she might encounter on this little adventure. Craven, however, bore his usual confidence.

“How do you know where to go?” she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“I bribed a servant.”

Of course, he did.

They hurried through the cold, wet darkness, keeping to the shadows. Once they reached the garden gate, he paused testing the latch, which had been left unlocked. Tossing a smirk her way, he slipped through.

Ross hesitated at the gate, not sure if she wanted to go through with it now that they were here. As if sensing her hesitation, Craven appeared before her, lifting one of his well-defined arrogant brows.

Coming? His eyes seemed to say, issuing a challenge.

Narrowing her eyes in response, she marched past him, keeping to the grass instead of the gravel path. With long strides, he took the lead again and instead of directing them to the hulking black shadow of

the abode, he led them to the carriage house. Drawing his coat tighter to her body, she watched as he removed a pin from his pocket and proceeded to pick the lock. Whatever servant he'd bribed hadn't thought it prudent to unlock this particular door. Curious, that.

After a moment, the door swung open and Craven motioned her inside, shutting the door behind her.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. A thick, festering scent that filled her nostrils and called the immediate attention of her focus to the room. She pressed her nose to the inside of Craven's jacket but not even his musky male fragrance could mask the pungent air.

"Bloody hell," he growled beside her.

She agreed with his sentiment. What did FitzWalter do in here?

With a slight shuffle of movement, a candle flared to life.

Ross blinked, then squinted, her eyes unaccustomed to the sudden light. Craven filled her vision first, his lips curled in disgust. Their gazes locked. His eyes mirrored her distaste.

"Well, Miss Bakersfield, dare I ask if this rotten smell is enough to cross his name off your list?"

She shook her head. "Something must have died in here, and recently, too. Perhaps Lord FitzWalter doesn't know of it."

A snort was her only answer.

He lifted the candle high and moved further into the room. At first, nothing appeared out of the ordinary. But as her eyes adjusted, she began to make out the outline of cupboards against the wall, stacked with jars. Brows furrowing, she stepped closer, motioning Craven to bring the light nearer.

He complied and they both leaned forward until their faces almost touched the glass containers. The jars were filled with what appeared to look like—

She jumped back with a yelp.

Entrails?

They both whirled and their gazes fastened on the hundreds of jars that were stacked against the walls of the room.

"What is this place?" she croaked, more to herself than Craven.

He answered nonetheless. "He experiments on the animals. Most people don't question what happens to them after they are rescued, they only care that he liberated them from evil, never imagining that real evil was masquerading as their hero."

"This is barbaric!"

"Agreed."

They moved even further into the room, both wary of what they may find, yet both unable to stop themselves.

"How did you discover his deception? And why hasn't anyone else? Furthermore, why does no one stop him? And where does he keep his

carriage?" She asked the last question almost as an afterthought.

"He doesn't own one, avails himself to hackneys instead. And most seem to be aware of his activities—at least amongst the men. No one speaks of it, however, too afraid they'd set off his ire and be experimented on themselves, I suppose."

Cowards. The lot of them.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him they should leave when a sudden whiny noise caught their attention.

Ross's ears perked up. "That sounded almost like a puppy," she murmured, her whisper barely audible.

Without further ado, she dashed off in the direction of the noise and into another room. She heard Craven curse behind her, but she paid him no heed, intent on discovering whether there were still any living animals in the carriage house.

Without warning, Craven grabbed her by the waist and hauled her against his broad chest, his lips pressing against her ear as he growled, "Damnation Miss Bakersfield, this is no time to play the savior."

She struggled in his embrace. "I will not leave if there are still animals caged here."

He cursed again, doubtless hearing the stubborn truth of her words. Setting her down, he manacled his fingers around her wrist in a tight hold, shooting her a warning look. She nodded, accepting his silent command that she remain by his side and not dash off without him.

Unlike the other room, this one was much smaller than the first and filled with empty cages. She studied each cage with attention and care, her feet moving closer to her protector of their own accord. To her left, the whining grew louder. She rushed over to a cage that held seven puppies, Craven remaining close by her side. The puppies scrambled closer to them, their whining growing louder and their big eyes pleading to be loved.

The sight broke her heart.

"We cannot leave them here."

"Neither can we take them with us."

His voice brooked no argument.

"They are babies. We cannot leave them."

"Giant babies," he mocked.

"I'm not leaving without them."

"Devil take it, we can't possibly—"

At the sudden creak of a door opening, both their heads whipped around. Craven extinguished the flame with his fingertips at once, plunging the room in darkness.

Fear clogged Ross's throat until she felt his strong fingers on her arm pulling her behind his back.

Footsteps drew nearer.

Craven maneuvered her back against the wall.

The footfalls drew closer still, along with the soft light of a candle. A man entered the room and Ross's eyes widened as he paused, his back to them, surveying the space.

If he turned, he would spot them.

She felt the muscles in Craven's body tighten just before he dropped her wrist and moved away from her, approaching FitzWalter, who at that moment started to turn. With speed Ross did not imagine he possessed, Craven shot forward and cuffed the man in the side of the head just before he fully faced them. He'd hit the man so hard, FitzWalter dropped to the ground like a stone.

She blinked down at the unconscious man in surprise.

"Run!" Craven snapped.

"Not without the puppies!" she snapped back.

"Bloody hell! If I regret this, I will take you over my knee," he muttered and in two fluid strides made his way to the cages and kicked them open.

"You are scaring them!" Ross nearly shouted when their wailing heightened to little puppy howls.

"Keep your voice down, woman, and grab some of them."

Ross gathered three of the furry balls into her arms, leaving Craven to manage four. They ran from the property like the devil himself nipped at their heels, stopping only once they reached the carriage.

Lucien watched in silent contemplation as Miss Bakersfield fawned over the damn dogs, arranging them on the seat beside her. His heart still pounded with fear, not for him, but for *her*. If FitzWalter had spotted them, he cursed, in no mood to kill a man for posing a threat to Miss Bakersfield. It remained to be seen, however, whether FitzWalter had indeed caught a glimpse of his intruders, though he was fairly certain he'd knocked the man out before that occurred.

"We must do something," Miss Bakersfield said, her gaze locking with his.

"We already have," he barked out, flinching when she jerked at his sharp retort. "We saved your puppies, didn't we?" he murmured more coolly, tightening the reins on his frayed temper.

He did not understand what was wrong with him. The mere thought of anyone harming the woman sitting across from him filled him with an overwhelming urge to throttle something. The reaction caught him off guard and disturbed him more than he cared to admit. He wanted her gone. Why should he care about anything else where she was concerned?

Her somber sigh wrenched his gut.

"That is not enough."

“What will you have me do?”

“We must *stop* him.”

Her soft throaty murmur spread through him like a wildfire, threatening to burn the thread of his conviction to ash. Damn those pleading emerald eyes. She invoked the instinct to protect and conquer, and he fought to gain control of the wildly possessive emotions seething inside him.

“I will send a note to the constable, anonymously, and inform him of FitzWalter’s depravity,” he said after a moment, his voice an annoyed grumble.

“That will curtail his activities for a while, but by no means stop him,” she pressed.

Craven leveled her with a glare. “I said I would reveal your list’s true characters; I never claimed I would save the world from their dastardly deeds.”

She shot him an equally narrow-eyed glare. “I cannot take the puppies home.”

His anger transformed to confusion and then disbelief before he narrowed his eyes at her once again. “No.”

“But you must! If I cannot take them home, as my mother would never permit it, *you* must. You have ample space for them.”

Craven shifted, leaning forward, refusing to react to her quivering lip. “No.”

“It shall only be until we find them loving homes,” she pleaded.

The words of acquiescence hovered on the tip of his tongue, but he would not say them.

“I’m not a bloody babysitter.”

“*Please.*”

His heart thawed.

What he wouldn’t give to hear her say that again, but only between the covers of his sheets, her chestnut hair displayed on his pillows. He closed his eyes, willing the provocative image of her beneath him away and discarding the direction his thoughts had taken. Only additional complications lay that way.

He settled back into his seat, arms folding over his chest. “Giving them away is not an option, at least not now. It would be too easy for your young twisted FitzWalter to follow the trail of puppies, like breadcrumbs leading straight back to us.”

“He is not *my* FitzWalter,” she bit out distractedly, as her brows had drawn together in concentration.

“Any grand ideas?”

Her eyes lifted. “You can always keep them. You do own an estate in the country, do you not?”

“Yes, but my answer remains the same.”

The dogs would only tie her to him more inescapably.

"You uncharitable oaf!" she hissed, her fiery temper flaring to life. "Can you truly be so self-absorbed?"

At the insult, he shot forward, intentionally giving her no time to react, and planted an arm on either side of her, caging her in. He could have left her to her choices, instead, reasons aside, he was assisting her. He was many things, yes, even a bloody oaf, but never self-absorbed.

Nose to nose, he whispered in a low, menacing voice, "Oh, I am the most selfish creature in existence, Miss Bakersfield. I pander only to my own desires and never to the whims of little girls such as you," his eyes lowered to her lips and he heard—*felt*—the sharp intake of her breath.

He pushed away from her. "Remember that the next time you plead for a favor."

She hugged a puppy close, her once pleading eyes now vacant and inscrutable. But Craven knew her will was resolute—she would keep the puppies herself if she had to.

Damnation!

He could not allow that. Not when that meant that FitzWalter could discover them in her possession.

"They can stay with me," he found himself snapping, feeling that it was one more thing he was sure to regret. "But only until I find a proper solution."

Those brilliant green eyes whipped to him, and the hope reflected there pinched at his heart. He felt like an utter ass.

"You will do it?"

"I just said so."

"Thank you. You will not be sorry."

He was not so sure that was true. Already his mind raced through possible solutions for this newest quandary.

"This would never have happened if you hadn't taken me to that vile place," she pointed out.

One brow arched up in question. "Shifting blame, Miss Bakersfield? Next, you will tell me I kidnapped you from your chambers and forced this night on you."

Her cheeks reddened.

"And do not even think to name the pups."

"I am not daft!" she exclaimed.

Perhaps not, but Craven recognized the complete look of adoration she bestowed on the dogs. How would it feel to have that look directed at him? The pups, expertly arranged on her lap, were certainly enjoying her attention.

He hadn't even taken into account how Pete may react to seven

little dogs entering his territory before he'd agreed. Neither had he considered that she would visit the puppies there—that she would be in his home, his sanctuary. There'd be no breaking free of her or the temptation she presented now. He peered at her through blazing eyes before looking away.

Yes, he was going to regret this.

Chapter 7

A man who had seen too much, indulged too young, or lived too fast. A man who had peered into the eyes of the very world he consumed from, unafraid and untouched by it—a man who had tired of its ample charms.

You could set this kind of man apart quite easily from any other sort. He walked with purposeful, unrushed strides, no compromise to be found in his stiff posture. There was a presence about him, a composure that bespoke of years of practice. His eyes, however, were where one could truly tell. They were the true observers of the world.

Cynicism cloaked a man of worldly exploits. Cynicism was his brand. From what Ross could gather and in her humble opinion, those were the men who never excessively imbibed, never gambled and never succumbed to gluttony. They'd already done it all. They observed, they calculated, and they conquered.

That was not to say they did not partake in any of those activities any longer, but such things held no favor for them.

Her father was not such a man.

Excessive was his brand.

He ate too much, laughed too loud, drank too much, and gambled zealously, and though Ross loved her father, she often wished he were a little less of everything.

Every opinion she had ever formed about life, about men in general, every observation she'd ever made, had been drawn from her father. Most of it disagreeable. It had, to some degree, become a habit of hers to compare him to every man she came into contact with. A herculean task at times, but no surprise the men on her list had the complete opposite traits—or so she had believed.

Just how similar in character were these men to her father?

Not that her father would ever kill an animal. He could not even ride a horse. He was simply too fat. In the matter of sins, however, his were mild in comparison. But one word sprang to mind when Ross thought of the men, and this was also a word that had risen in the past where her father's deeds were concerned.

Questionable.

They all appeared to be of *questionable* character.

Not that Ross had known that when she first drafted her list.

When she had approached her mother and informed her she wished to find a husband of her own, her mother had jumped at the news and begun to arrange their trip to London at once. It hadn't, however, been until after her father had declared he would remain in the country that a spark had entered her mother's eye. She refused to believe her mother would purposefully assist in selecting gentlemen that were questionable.

Ross stared up at Craven's residence in silent contemplation, recalling her earlier conversation with her mother.

They had been seated in the drawing room, enjoying tea and biscuits, her mother gushing about all the events they'd attend this week when Ross had suddenly wondered whether her mother was happy in her arranged marriage.

When Ross asked if her mother was happy, her mother had seemed baffled by the question but had answered nonetheless.

Choose your husband wisely, my dear, or birth scores of children to love and love you in return.

Her mother may not have married for love, but neither had she lacked it.

Ross's heart constricted at the memory. She did not want a man such as her father. She wanted a man such as... *No*. Neither did she want a man such as *him*, one dangerous to her heart. Truth be told, she did not know what she wanted anymore, only that she longed for companionship, a family.

Her father had once told her that she should not set her sights too high and must remain demure at all times. Alfred, on the other hand, had been the heir to the Marquis of Linden, which pleased her mother but not father. He believed Alfred too arrogant and entitled.

Ross supposed that was the reason men were entitled to sow their oats, while women were kept secluded much of their lives. Women were expected to be less than that of their counterpart. And no man would believe that a woman sneaking about in the dark into an unmarried gentleman's home was a good idea.

Her train of thought evaporated when a ruffle of leaves made her jump. Glancing wildly about, she stood motionless until she was certain no one else was in the garden with her.

Craven's garden.

Tonight was the night she reclaimed Peter the Great.

Unfortunately, there was no easy way into his home. All the windows on the ground floor were shut, and all the doors were locked, as they should be. The only way she could gain access to the house was by climbing a huge tree, crawling across a sturdy branch, and entering through a window on the second floor (which happened to be the only window ajar), all the while hoping she did not plummet to her death.

Sparing a skeptical glance down at her clothes, it was a distinct possibility, she reflected. She hadn't expected such an entrance. Her dress, while black, was not tree-climbing attire.

With a slight shrug of her shoulder, Ross marched up to the tree. It was worth the try at least; if not, she'd made all the effort for naught.

Without further ado, she grabbed a lower branch and lifted herself up, setting her foot on another nearby branch, which protruded on the far left side of where her hand clutched a branch on the far right side.

Ross just wagered she looked ridiculous, sprawled across the tree in such a position.

Doubt seeped into her mind.

Above her, a little farther than she would like, she spied another branch. It was her best chance to heave her up to the denser part of the tree from where she could climb without any difficulty.

"I hope I don't regret this," she muttered under her breath.

There was no helping it. Lifting one arm, she made her bid to snatch the elusive branch. Her fingers grazed the rough bark but she hadn't been able to hoist herself up to grab hold.

Ross closed her eyes, inhaled deeply and tried again. Three attempts later, she managed to lift her body enough to fold her fingers over the bark.

With a triumphant smile, she climbed and twined through the remaining branches until she reached the one by the window.

Now for the toughest part, Ross mused.

She needed to crawl over the thick branch without falling to the ground. Slowly and ever so carefully, she started to scoot over the thick branch to the window. She supposed the principle of "one step at a time" applied here, too—one hand at a time. So, placing one before the other, she began pushing her body forward, slowly crossing over the branch, which had appeared much broader from the ground.

A candle suddenly flared in the room.

Ross ceased all movement, her heart jumping to her throat.

The curtains hadn't been drawn, and through the window, she glimpsed four servants carrying buckets filled with water. More servants arrived with more water, filling a tub and then, as all of them

dispersed, Craven stepped into her field of vision, flinging the door shut.

Blast her luck!

The only way into his residence was through *his* room. There was no possible way she would manage to sneak past him without waking him.

She watched in fascination as he shrugged out of his jacket.

Mother Mary.

Surely he wouldn't expose his naked flesh and bathe while she peered on? But then again, he did not know she was up in his tree, spying on him at this very moment, did he?

A wicked thrill made its way down her spine. How scandalous! She observed with abated breath as he proceeded to unbutton his shirt. He took his time, seemingly in no rush to undress. Her eyes flicked to the water. Even from where she crouched in the tree, she still had a clear view of the inviting steam.

His shirt dropped from his fingers to the floor.

Ross's eyes feasted on his gloriously powerful chest and the span of his broad shoulders, which were much wider and more masculine than she first imagined.

Her hand lifted to touch the base of her throat and her mouth went dry. Hiding this man's impossibly strong body beneath layers of fabric seemed like a crime, a travesty. The muscles in his arms rippled as he made quick work of his boots and began to unbutton his breeches.

Ross swallowed.

"Blessed Virgin," she muttered as she watched, spellbound the moment the earl's breeches dropped to the floor. He stepped out of them, the strength in his legs dazzling.

With his back to her, he sauntered to the warm steamy water, giving Ross a generous view of his back. Her eyes took in the strength of him before she lowered her gaze to his buttocks. There was no part of his body that she could see, that was not sewn with weighted muscles. Were all men so magnificently built? Then Ross remembered her father and tossed the notion aside. No, they were not.

Then Craven bent over to run his fingers through the water, half turning in her direction. Ross nearly lost her grip on the branch then and there.

"Heavenly Father..."

Leaning closer, she squinted, taking a good look at his unmentionables with deep curiosity. Nestled between his strong legs hung his male member, much different from her own. It lay rather limp on what she could only describe as a pouch-like sack that reminded Ross of two ripe pears.

She watched in fascination as he lifted one leg and dipped his foot

in the water, testing it before his limb disappeared from her eager gaze. The other leg promptly followed and she ogled his form for one last time before his entire frame was arrested from her regard. His head fell back and a sigh of pleasure escaped his lips.

She shook her head, gathering her wits once more. There was no way she'd be able to retrieve Peter the Great tonight. And if she'd thought shattering a window would not alert her hound and the puppies and cause an uproar, she'd have done it. In fact, the longer she sat there, the more she cursed herself a fool. Of course, the earl would know she was responsible if his beloved *Pete* vanished.

Muttering a soft vow that she would find a smarter way of obtaining her dog back, she cast one last look at the gloriously built man and sat back on the branch, considering her options. Crawling backward would be the better choice. However, it alarmed her to not being able to observe her progress.

"Turn around it is," she muttered under her breath and gripped the branch. Drawing up her legs in her effort to turn, her foot caught in her dress, jerking her body to the side. The action caused her to slip from the branch. Much to her dismay, she let loose a yelp as she dropped like a stone, tumbling from the tree and falling flat on her back on the ground below.

In a breathtaking moment of shock, of struggling to pull air into her lungs, she lay on her back, staring up at the stars, before she instinctively rolled into the shrubberies along the side of the house. Moments later, she heard the window above her crack fully open. She lay still as night, thankful for her black clothes shielding her from cool blue eyes as they swept over the yard.

Not only did she find it exceptionally hard to breathe, but the shrubberies she'd rolled into weren't shrubberies at all, but rose bushes. The thorns were pricking her exposed skin.

After a long, drawn out, utterly heart-pounding moment, she heard the window slide shut and took the risk of peeking out from below the bushes to look up at the window. Satisfied that the probing eyes had gone, she quickly sprang to her feet and bolted across the lawn towards the street.

She'd just dashed through the iron gate when the house's rear door opened. Launching herself across the street, she ducked into the shadows of the next building, her heart thudding in her ears. She glanced back at the house and gasped when Craven, in all his magnificent splendor, appeared inside the door. Thank God his most private parts were covered with a towel, as he searched the grounds.

It occurred to Ross then that he may be on high alert after the FitzWalter incitement. Retreating until her back hit a wall, she plastered herself tighter against the surface, remaining as still as

possible. She refused to move even when Craven returned to the plush inside of his home. Instead, she continued to stand in the darkness for another quarter of an hour before she deemed it fit to dash into the street, groaning from the sudden stiffness in her back.

She would need to revisit her plan to obtain Peter the Great.

Another, rather random thought, occurred to her. How delightful it would be to choose a husband based solely on the amount of muscle in his hulking frame. Were any of her other remaining choices built like a rock, perhaps? If love wasn't a requisite, perhaps a powerful frame should be. If nothing else, Ross could enjoy sneaking a peek at him while he bathed in the comfort of their home.

For if tonight had taught her one thing, it was to never spy on a bathing gentleman while sitting in a tree.

Chapter 8

The following day, instead of climbing trees in the dark, Lady Rosslyn knocked on the earl's door—that alone a dastardly deed according to some, given the lord's reputation. She, however, remained unperturbed by gossips, keeping a firm grip on her wits, and focused on finally being reunited with Peter the Great.

Admittedly, as names went, it was an odd one. But she'd always loved the name Peter and the first time she'd set eyes on him as a puppy, she had known he was no ordinary dog, but a great one. Thus, the name had sprung into creation.

She recalled how Alfred had had a good laugh when she gifted him with the biggest puppy he'd ever seen. At the verbal pronouncement of his name, he'd cracked up altogether. It was a happy memory, though, even if it annoyed her that he'd shortened her wondrous formulation to an average "Pete."

She scoffed at the nickname.

It was beyond outlandish. Who named a dog Pete? Pete was such a...*little* name for such a big extraordinary canine.

First, she would see for herself how her dog fared and then, by all that was holy, she would get him back.

One way or another.

But Peter the Great wasn't the only reason for her visit today. She'd come to scope out his residence, visit the puppies, and to return his jacket, which was still in her possession. While she found the earl's scent intoxicating, much to her chagrin, she did not find it productive to be sniffing at it constantly. And it was only a matter of time before her maid found it hidden in her closet.

'Twas bad enough the previous night's adventure had left her with sorely decrepit limbs that had taken some time to work the stiffness

out of them, but the left side of her cheek also sported three light scratches from the rose thorns. All that she could explain away, however, should the earl suspect she'd skulked about his yard last night.

She had fallen over her own feet in the garden.

Simple and not a *complete* lie. Her tangled legs were the cause of her fall, after all. Ross just hoped she managed to limit her grunts and groans within the acceptable means of her excuse, should questions arise.

The jacket, however...not so easily explained.

The door was yanked open by the butler, his expression inscrutable as he stared down at her. Her earlier missive to enquire whether she may pop in for a visit had been met with an affirmative; a yes scrawled on a card in such bold letters that Ross had imagined it a reluctant grunt of a reply. And yet it appeared the fastidious earl had neglected to inform his butler.

"I am here to see Peter the Great," she announced, lifting her chin up a notch.

Without so much as a bat of an eye the butler shut the door in her face only to be opened again a perplexing moment later, the butler now motioning her inside.

Not even a moment's hesitation hindered her step as she glided into the foyer and tossed him the devil's coat. If he registered any surprise at the action, none showed on his face. Instead, he led her through the hall, across a drawing room, and past two doors that led to the garden. She took stock of all her surroundings, knots tightening in her stomach at the prospect of seeing her pet again.

Outside, Peter the Great lay on his side, the seven puppies all competing for his attention. She needn't have worried, however, about his remembering her. For the moment she stepped out, he lifted his big head, ears perking up, and with the wag of his tail he scrambled up on all fours and rushed to her side.

Goodness, he's grown large!

Ross braced her body for impact, bending her knees to form a crouching position. It occurred to her then that she may have benefited from waiting another day or so, just so that the worst of her aches healed. Unsurprisingly, she was promptly knocked to the ground as the great, big Peter slobbered all over her.

"Oh, stop!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

She attempted to right herself, for her skirts had pulled up and her cheeks were now coated in dog saliva, but the hound was almost as big as a horse. And heavy. He must weigh around a hundred pounds! Then seven puppies surrounded her, too, writhing happily and tickling her skin with their tiny little tongues.

Laughter bubbled up inside her as she made another failed attempt to sweep into a sitting position. She pushed him to no avail; the huge dog just didn't want to get up, his entire body having settled nicely onto hers, two huge paws on both of her shoulders.

A piercing whistle sounded from a distance and the weight of Peter the Great suddenly lifted off of her, though he settled down again just beside her, his tongue undulating out of his mouth, watching her with big brown eyes.

She rose onto her elbows and glanced about, noting the stuffy butler had already disappeared and there was no sign of Craven in the garden. Her eyes flicked over her shoulder and she glimpsed the shadow of a figure stirring by the window before a bark-howl drew her awareness back to the canines.

Sporting a wide grin, she murmured, "My, how you have grown into a strapping young dog, just as I always thought you would."

She patted Peter the Great on the head, tickling his ears the way he'd loved her to do when he was still a pup. It seemed ridiculous now, watching him, to think she could've stolen him last night. What would she have done with him? He was much too big to hide in her home without her mother discovering him. And he would be discovered, if not by his size or bark, then surely by the amounts of food he must wolf down daily. A dog this size did not survive by slim pickings. And what of the puppies who adored him? She'd almost taken away their protector.

Ross released a regretful sigh. It appeared she must revise her plan altogether. Perhaps she should first marry and then bring him into her new home. An image of Craven, his powerful male body wrapping around her, assaulted her mind at the thought.

Blast it! She should never have spied on him. Now her mind was ripe with fantasies. Fantasies that would do her no good as she would never call him husband.

Craven exuded sinful intentions. No lady could live a comfortable, tame life with him—not with those arctic blue eyes tracking every move, those lips promising countless nights of pleasure. A man like him would consume her very soul.

Distant music caught her interest and she angled her head toward the house again. Somewhere within, somebody was playing a song she'd only heard once before. She sat frozen in fierce contemplation, attempting to call to mind where she'd listened to the beautiful song before.

It was calling to her. Her hands dropped away from Peter the Great and she quickly gathered the puppies that had crawled onto her lap, depositing them gently on the grass. Her feet followed the chords of the captivating tune, leading her to a drawing room.

Ross paused just outside the door.

The rough hum of his voice reached her long before she spotted Craven seated on the edge of a chaise, an unusual instrument cradled in his arms. A baroque guitar, if she was not mistaken. She felt like an intruder, but took another step forward, peeking through the slightly open door for a more frontal view.

She watched, mesmerized, as his fingers moved over the strings that stretched over the instrument, creating a beautiful consonance—a Spanish melody. His eyelashes rested on the skin of his cheeks, and a peaceful, almost serene look graced his features. So unlike the Craven, she'd come to know.

No wonder he abhorred musicals. They simply did not compare to this elegant style, his reverence of one instrument instead of many.

A distant memory stirred within her mind. The same tune played in a different setting—in Alfred's home. She recalled hearing this very song, distantly emerging from one of the rooms when she had stopped by to bid her fiancé farewell for the last time.

She recalled her curiosity over it. Even then, as distracted as she was, she'd noticed how she'd felt safe on hearing it, as if she'd finally arrived home after a long journey. She'd loved it from the start, but had completely forgotten to ask Alfred about it.

It seemed she'd lived a lifetime since that day.

Her surroundings and original intentions faded as the man producing this captivating music started to grow brighter in her vision. His stark, beautiful profile, his face completely lost in the music he was creating, stirred her senses and her heart as no other man ever had.

Slowly, the melody created by his fingers could no longer be heard over the beating of her own heart. This had been Alfred's best friend. His brother of the heart. The person he trusted to fight at his side in war. The person he trusted more, perhaps even loved more, than he had loved her. He had gone to war at her father's request, but he'd ventured into enemy territory of his own free will for this man.

This melody had reminded her of all of that, forced her to acknowledge the truth she'd been avoiding, and redeemed him in her eyes, softening her heart even though she did not want it to surrender. The blasted man had stolen her dog and *renamed* him, for pity's sake. But there was no denying that Alfred would never have wanted Ross to blame his friend for using the same abbreviation *he* had started.

"Damn you," she muttered up at the roofing.

Lucien became aware of eyes—her eyes—burning into his skin as he played a sorrowful melody he'd learned during his brief time in Spain, but he did not acknowledge her just yet.

After the war, he had lost interest in all things musical and he had, in fact, completely forgotten about this particular song, until the day he'd first glimpsed Miss Bakersfield from afar. Why he recalled the melody then was beyond his understanding, since the song bore no significance to her. But for some reason, her return to London had awakened something he believed long dead inside him—the desire to play and create music again.

So he resisted the urge to pin her with a cold stare, one that would make her scamper from his presence, an old habit when someone ventured too close. Instead, he continued to focus on each string and the tone it produced—and what it produced in him.

Inner peace.

He had forgotten how much music soothed his spirit.

Earlier, he'd only just shut his eyes, giving himself over to the melody, when a loud bark jerked him out of his focus and he completely missed his cords, giving birth to a horrendous sound. His eyes had flung open and he'd sauntered to the window in time to observe a red-faced Miss Bakersfield, battling with Pete on the ground. With a practiced whistle, he'd brought Pete to heel. The dog could be as stubborn as its master.

Now she stood a few feet away from where he sat, her undivided attention on him. *A mouse in an eagle's nest.*

Green eyes met blue ones.

He finished his tune with practiced ease, savoring the last of the melody before he stood, setting his guitar down with slow, careful movements before he turned to her again, straightening to his full height.

"Miss Bakersfield," he murmured in a lazy drawl. "I trust the reunion went well."

"My apologies, I did not mean to intrude upon your time."

He glanced down at his guitar and shrugged. "I've only recently taken up playing again. I'm a bit out of practice."

She shot him a skeptical look, taking a step into the room. "You are an excellent player."

If Lucien had been a schoolboy, he might have flushed at the awe in her voice. Instead, his lips stretched into a warm smile. "Thank you."

"Does the song have any meaning? It sounds Spanish, I think."

He inclined his head, oddly pleased that she would know that. "You have a good ear. I traveled a bit through Europe after my studies and met an old guitarist in Spain. He taught me this song and after I perfected it, gifted me with his guitar."

"That was very generous of him."

Lucien warmed at the memory. "He said that he was too old to do his instrument any more justice, claimed his fingers hurt from gout."

“Gout? Why that is terrible! I’ve heard it’s quite painful.”

Lucien nodded.

“What is the song about?” she pressed.

“It’s a piece he created for his lost love.”

Intertwining her fingers, she glanced around the room before her eyes landed back on him. “That sounds romantic.”

“I suppose if you call your one true love leaving you for another man after she promised you eternity, romantic...then yes.”

She glanced away, brushing at her skirts. “So he gifted you with his guitar and you took a liking to it.”

“Indeed.”

“I heard you play that song once before. I recognized it now again in the garden.”

His brows furrowed in thought. For some reason, his heart slammed against his chest and he hardly recognized it as his own. Nothing affected him. *Nothing*. But still, his heart had sped up to a frantic pace at her soft admission.

“You have heard me play before?”

He held his breath.

She nodded sheepishly. “I must confess I did not know it was you at the time. Only that it was beautiful.”

Ah.

“It must have been at Alfred’s, then.”

She pursed her lips in response.

“Why are you here, Miss Bakersfield?”

Her eyes jerked to his. The question surprised her.

Good.

“You know why I’m here.”

“Do I? You are here without a chaperone, claiming to reunite with a dog you last saw as a puppy. So I will ask again. Why are you here?”

She lifted her shoulders in a casual shrug. “I not only wanted to see Peter the Great but the puppies, as well. But now that we are conversing, I am curious as to who you plan to unmask next.”

“Are you so eager to uncover the questionable pursuits of the men on your precious list?”

“Eager to marry and collect Peter the Great.”

Lucien stilled, the thudding of his heart surging in protest even as he retained a well-practiced smile on his face, giving nothing of his emotions away. He cursed himself for caring that she’d soon be married and, if she took Pete, they would have no cause to remain...*friends*.

No, he was damn well keeping the dog. Why it was important to him to continue an attachment with this woman, well that, he dared not delve into now. He only knew that it was imperative,

acknowledged that as fact, and moved on.

“I see.”

She said nothing, only stared at him with big eyes, waiting for his further response. As it were, he had planned on sending for her tonight in any case and saw no reason for that to change.

“Tonight, I will wait outside your home at midnight. Do not be late, timing is crucial.”

“Midnight?”

He smirked at the reluctance in her voice. “Now you become uneasy?”

“If we get caught—”

“Miss Bakersfield, if you are seen now, in broad daylight, alone in my home as you currently are, you will be ruined.”

Her eyes narrowed on him, making her even lovelier. “Why is that? Two years ago, no sordid rumors of your reputation floated about.”

Lucien blinked, then threw his head back and laughed at her suspicious tone. Leave it to Miss Bakersfield to question the nature of his reputation instead of fearing it. She did have a point, however, but he was not about to admit his notorious reputation had been nothing but a fabrication to keep marriage-minded misses off his trail and others at a distance.

After a moment, he said, “It’s a reputation that suits me, so I thought I’d keep it.”

She snorted. “You are no more a rake than I’m a princess.”

“Careful, Miss Bakersfield, you might just challenge me to prove a point.”

Her eyes widened at that. “You would never.”

“Never what?” he shot back. “Never take advantage of a lady who entered my premises unchaperoned?”

He saw her flinch in response.

“I am very much the rogue they paint me to be. Do not forget that the next time you think to enter my yard.”

He’d phrased the words purposefully to gauge her reaction and wasn’t disappointed. Her shoulders jerked, the movement slight, but he caught it all the same. His gut never failed him, and yesterday it had alerted him to a trespasser. Even when he’d inspected the property and found no sign of anyone, he’d felt her presence as sure as the sun rose every morning.

“You mean your home,” she murmured.

“Tell me, Miss Bakersfield, do you make a habit of sneaking about in the dead of night alone?”

Her gaze flew to his and the truth sparked in her eyes, yet still, she denied her escapade in the form of a question, “Do you truly believe that I, a woman alone, would sneak around the streets of London in

the dead of night?"

He regarded her, noting her outrage without feeling the force of it. What a confounding woman, this Miss Bakersfield. He shrugged, allowing her this victory. "I should hope not. Dangerous men lurk around these streets."

"Yes, well, I better be off before my mother starts to question my whereabouts. I shall meet you tonight, and I'll remind *you* not to be late."

Lucien chuckled as he watched Miss Bakersfield execute a haughty exit. That was until his gaze dropped to her hips as she left, their sway hypnotic to his eyes, and his laughter cut out.

The damn woman would unravel his heart yet.

Chapter 9

Patience had never been one of Lucien's stronger suits. He waited for Miss Bakersfield, his fingers tapping against the leather seat of the carriage, wondering if she had bloody well stood him up. He was on edge. Something primal simmered beneath the surface, a razor-edge sharpness that noted everything, every little nuisance of his surroundings. Even his reason for unmasking the deplorable habits of her potential husbands was under scrutiny.

His purpose for helping her did not ring true. Not entirely. A part of him wished her gone; the other part wanted to kiss that pert little mouth until she begged him to stop. And then there was her intoxicating scent. It still lingered in his carriage. There was no escaping it.

The back door to her home slowly opened and she appeared, a vision wrapped in a black cloak, her face concealed by shadows. She quietly eased it shut and walked over to him. He flung open the carriage door. Their eyes locked, and when she paused before entering, he did not delay in leaning forward to grip her waist and lift her up into the tightly confined interior in one fell swoop.

"That was unnecessary," she said, settling in across from him.

He arched a mocking brow. "Debatable. You were gawking at me."

"I was not!" she exclaimed.

He shrugged. "Are you ready to discover how your sainted artist enjoys creating his art?"

She shot him a dubious look and he chuckled. So Miss Bakersfield still harbored doubts that he would prove all his claims. The day had felt drawn out after she'd left his home and he'd spent half of that time berating himself for the scene he would expose her to tonight, but still, that hadn't stopped his plans. This maddening obsession to

show her the true caliber of the men she'd picked may push her beyond her ability to keep her composure. Their vices were far outside what she was likely to imagine.

He rapped against the roof and the carriage lurched forward.

"Are you certain you wish to go forth with this?" he felt compelled to ask.

"I am curious how you would even know of his proclivities...if they do exist."

Fair question. "Servants talk."

She raised a brow. "Servants talk? That is your answer?"

"Men talk?"

She rolled her eyes, drawing a small smile from him. The sweet scent of her perfume wafted up to his nostrils and he inhaled deeply. He felt his pulse spike as they stared at each other, not saying a word. The air between them seemed to sizzle.

Her lips parted.

His eyes lowered to her plush mouth.

"Craven..."

"After all we are about to share, call me Lucien."

"That sounds positively ominous."

They continued to stare at each other, taking stock of each other's temperament. The carriage came to an abrupt halt, interrupting the spell that had weaved a magical pull between them.

Lucien's attention snapped back to the present and without a word he exited the carriage, holding out his arm to assist her. Instead of taking his offered hand, the little minx jumped down and marched past him, her back stiff. What in the blazes did she have to be irritable about now?

Lucien's hand snaked out and circled her waist, guiding her in the opposite direction. "This way, Miss Bakersfield."

Unlike their previous adventure, they were heading to the main house this time. At his arrangement, a window had been left slightly ajar for their entrance. He located it, pushed it open with one hand, and motioned for her with his other. "Come, I will boost you up."

"Surely you do not intend for me to go first. What if I get caught?"

Lucien felt himself go stiff at the suggestion that he'd put her in unnecessary danger, or worse yet, would not or could not adequately protect her. He shot her a menacing look, turned, gripped the edge of the window and hoisted himself up and over. Once inside, he bent, snatched her beneath her arms and hauled her up like a child. She inhaled sharply, grabbing at his neck with a soft gasp, and clung to him as he pulled her through the window and set her on her feet.

"You can let go of me now," she murmured, her arms falling away from him, leaving him feeling robbed.

He blinked, his eyes flicking to his hands, which had firmly planted themselves on her waist, before snatching them away as though she'd burned him. He turned his back to her, surveying the room and battling to get his desire under control.

"So, where do we go from here?"

"If my source is correct, then we need not move from this spot, but merely hide behind this curtain."

"We wait? For what?"

"For whom," Lucien corrected, stepping away from the curtain to inspect the room more carefully, but more so to put some distance between them.

She followed his step, however, keeping close and almost touching him. Bloody hell, did the woman have no idea of the havoc she could wreak on a man? Lucien wanted to groan at the prickles of awareness that sparked through him every time she brushed up against him, her scent causing his cock to throb with desire.

This had been a bad idea. He glanced at the window, debating whether or not they should leave. There were other ways to do this, like remaining outside and peering through the window. In fact, why hadn't he thought to do that before?

Laughter, followed by the thud of footsteps alerted them that they were about to be set upon and both ducked behind the thick curtain, careful to avoid being seen.

Lucien spared a glance down at his companion, noting her wide eyes and the grip she had on his shirt. Her smell stirred his blood, leaving him no way to shake it off, not while they were so tightly confined together.

They listened as Lord Lincoln entered the spacious room, accompanied by a woman, laughing coyly.

"You tease me, dear," Lincoln said. "You know how I prefer it."

The throaty chuckle of the woman met their ears again. "And I delight in how I contribute to your art."

Male laughter filled the room. "You are insatiable, dear."

"Only for you."

This was followed by the sound of rustling and a guttural moan.

Lucien grimaced. He hadn't considered Miss Bakersfield's reaction upon hearing Lord Lincoln receive pleasure while they hid behind the drapery. Neither had he considered his own reaction at being stuck with Miss Bakersfield in such close quarters while it occurred. What the hell had he been thinking?

Miss Bakersfield was an innocent, had never experienced the intimacies of a man and woman, and, from what he'd gathered, she had lived a sheltered life. Already he had subjected her to animal cruelty and now this madness. Whatever she heard or saw tonight was

not something that could be unseen or unheard. He needed to get them away from here.

Unfortunately, the lady had other plans. Before he could stop her, or even register what she was about to do, her hand parted the curtain and she peeked at the couple, her hand flying to her mouth in shock.

Lucien cursed.

He did not have to look to know what she saw, but he did so anyway. Lord Lincoln stood with his back to them, slightly angled to the side. It was just enough of an angle to see that the woman was on her knees before him, his manhood in her mouth. The randy bastard, on the other hand, appeared unconcerned that a woman was suckling him and had started to paint, leaving wide and urgent brushstrokes on the canvas.

Lucien glanced down at Miss Bakersfield, his gaze fixating on the pulse on her neck. A shiver of awareness crept down his spine. He wanted to gather her into his arms and strip her naked. He wanted to spend hours entangled with her on silken sheets, skin to skin, sharing her body.

He swallowed.

So did she.

His eyes followed the movement of her slender throat.

Desire slammed into him with turbulent force.

Christ.

His body ached with need and it took great effort not to bend down and claim her lips with his, to demand she desire him the same savage way he craved her touch. What a bloody mess. He should step away from her, away from the lure that he could not seem to escape, but instead of setting distance between them, he threaded his fingers through hers, in need of the contact.

Her eyes lifted, searching his, and her lips parted at the hunger he could no longer manage to conceal. The warmth of her breath sent a shudder through his body. He nearly came undone at her small gasp. This was madness, utter madness, provoked by the scene unfolding before them. Still, it grated on his nerves that she might not feel the same thirst for him when he was about to explode with burning need.

Some women could wrap a man around their delicate fingers and from those fingers stemmed heavenly bliss. Then there were women who were pure temptation, but their claws only served to rip a man's entrails to shreds. Damn if he knew in which category Miss Bakersfield belonged.

He was in so much trouble.

Rosslyn stared at the couple participating in an act she could not possibly begin to name, acutely aware of the man beside her. Aware

of his overwhelming presence, of those eyes that glittered with blue ice, yet smoldered with fire—a paradox that burned holes through her soul. It was hard not to be drawn to him under normal circumstances, let alone under these.

The slight ripple of movement when his fingers laced with hers caught her off guard and wide eyes jerked up to meet his. Did he think to give her reassurance? She searched his gaze and her lips parted in a small gasp at the naked desire she found in the depth of his stare.

At once images flooded her mind, flesh against flesh. How would it feel to trace her fingers over Lucien's broad chest, along the muscles of his thigh? Thanks to her tree incident she now possessed intimate knowledge of his male anatomy, strong arms, and legs, his muscular torso.

She stifled a groan.

Somewhere, within these past few days, a shift had taken place. Ross had stopped alluding to the gentlemen on her lists as potential husbands, but rather as men to be exposed. Uncloaking their perverted deeds had become imperative. More importantly, she'd ceased finding fault with the man beside her, instead noting all his other, more appreciable traits. She could easily imagine being swept up in those arms as he carried her to his bedroom, wickedness animated on his expert lips.

The thought—and her reaction to it—left her troubled and shaken. And yet, she reached up to cup his shadowed jaw. His nostrils flared at her touch and her pulse picked up speed. He looked powerful, intimidating, and downright delectable to her eyes.

A loud audible groan snapped her back to the present and her hand fell away, drawing her attention back to the couple on the other side of the curtain. Unable to contain her curiosity, Ross parted the draping again, amazed that the couple had become so engulfed with their pleasure that they did not feel another presence in the room.

The woman, now positioned on all fours, made loud noises while Lord Lincoln pounded away with slow, purposeful strokes. His desire did not seem to restrict the flow of his brushstrokes nor influence them in any negative way. The entire display fascinated Ross and a sudden thought occurred to her. If Lord Lincoln ever married, would he expect his wife to fill this role, or would he continue with his mistress? Either way, she did not imagine she'd make him a suitable wife nor he a suitable husband.

“How long can this continue?”

It was a mere whisper of breath but Craven had heard her, for he tightened the grip on her hand a little. Then his mouth was pressed against her ear and he murmured, “Hours.”

“But that is impossible,” Ross muttered, deciding not to react to the

husky note she'd heard in his voice.

She shivered when his lips skimmed over the flesh of her cheek in a sensual caress.

"Are you certain?"

She shook her head. She certainly was not. How could two people possibly go on like that for hours? It seemed unnatural.

"I take it poor Lincoln has been scratched from your list."

"You knew he would be the moment you decided to bring me here," she accused.

The whisper of a chuckle reached her ear.

"I do not know if I can stand this for hours, what are we to do?"

He lifted her hand to his lips for a brief, fleeting kiss. "Do not worry, my dear, in a few moments a disturbance will begin somewhere from within the house and we will make our escape."

"You planned this?" She couldn't prevent a hint of censure from creeping into her voice.

"I made preparations *in case* this might happen. I did not know for certain it would. Perhaps," he continued in that throaty and vexingly delicious low voice of his, "you will take me at my word when I tell you to scratch all of the remaining prospects from your little list."

Ross was tempted to do just that. It would be so easy to follow his directive, to give in to his word. Her mind, however, rebelled against the idea.

"And why would I do such a thing?"

His eyes burned into hers and the next thing she knew she was in his embrace, his mouth on hers, hard and urgent. To her surprise she was kissing him back ardently, clinging to him in wild abandon.

This man already had too much power over her. If she was not careful, she might follow Lord Lincoln's paramour's lead and dive into bed with the devil.

With her heart beating rapidly in concession with his, she tore away from him, her breathing labored and coming out in short gasps. A moment later, before Craven could respond, a sudden stir of activity erupted beyond the door. Craven immediately snatched her around the waist and pulled her against his firm chest.

The instant their bodies connected, a curious influx of emotion spread through her and Ross stilled. He inched them closer to the open window, which neither of them had thought to close.

The couple inside scrambled for their attire, and even from behind the curtain Ross could tell their movements were clipped from anger and displeasure.

"Stay here, Margaret," Lord Lincoln's voice snapped, followed by thumping footsteps.

No, not happy at all.

“And miss all the fun, my love? I think not,” the woman murmured and the sound of softer, gentler footsteps signaled her departure.

And just like that, she was released from Craven’s hold and lifted through the open window.

Once outside Ross closed her eyes and inhaled the crisp night air, willing it to cleanse her mind from the array of confusing emotions whirling inside of her. She was pretty certain her cheeks displayed every shade of red.

“My apologies, Miss Bakersfield,” Craven’s clipped voice whispered from behind her. “The plan was ill-thought. I should have known better.”

Ross turned, her eyes connecting with his. With wariness, she waited for him to further remark on their kiss. When he didn’t, she let out a relieved sigh.

“I came out of my own curiosity,” she murmured. “It is I that should have known better.”

A small smile curved his chiseled mouth. “Aren’t we a pair?”

“I would not have believed Lord Lincoln’s...” she paused, searching for an appropriate word, “*ritual*, had I not seen it with my own eyes. It is depraved yet fascinating at the same time.”

His eyes narrowed, a hard edge entering him. “You *are* crossing him off your list.”

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “Though I cannot help but wonder whether Lord Lincoln would expect his wife to fill that role.”

A low growl emitted from his chest. “Best not to wonder about such things, Miss Bakersfield.”

“Please, call me Rosslyn, or Ross, as my friends do. I believe we are past the point of formalities, do you not agree?”

He raised a brow at what he probably thought were unexpected words from her. Perhaps she had been too hasty in her request, as formalities indicated a lack of intimacy.

“Rosslyn—Ross,” he tested her name on his tongue, “that is an odd choice for a nickname.”

She bit her lip at the sensation caused by his soft purr of her name.

“Not so odd when you live in the country and climb a lot of trees,” she said after a moment.

His blue eyes glowed as he stared at her. “Those men do not deserve you.”

“I would think not,” she murmured, spellbound by his intense, intimate stare. “No man deserves the gentle touch of a woman.”

Suddenly she was floating, swept off her feet by strong arms as his lips came crashing down on hers again, his tongue forcing entrance into the cavern of her mouth. A tremor ran through her as she melted against his body, her arms circling his neck. She was distantly aware

of him carrying her, the crack of a door and then a slight shift as he lowered them onto the seat of the carriage, his mouth not once leaving hers.

Her inner voice whispered of the dangers, but she was beyond heeding their warning. It was too late. She craved his touch, his kiss. She wanted him. All of him. She pulled at his cravat, his shirt, and even his hair as she felt one of his hands lowering to her derriere. She became aware of the evidence of his desire, pressing against her where she rested on his lap and battled to regain her wits, which had scattered at his touch. It was only when his other arm lifted to cup her breast and a moan of pure ecstasy erupted from her throat, that a small hint of her sanity returned.

Pushing at the wall of his chest, she once again found the strength to pull away, willing him to release her from the cage of his arms.

With a growl, his arms disappeared from her person and Ross was shocked by the instant lack of warmth as she scrambled from his lap.

“We must go,” she murmured, not able to meet his eyes.

His probing gaze burned into her, but he said nothing, which was a relief. His silence, on the other hand, echoed more loudly through the carriage than his rap on the roof. The carriage jolted forward.

To her dismay, she noted her hands were trembling. Rubbing them against her skirt, she hoped he did not notice how her world had just completely unraveled.

For unravel it had.

Chapter 10

Rosslyn Bakersfield had vowed to never fall in love again. Yet here she was, not falling in love, mind you, but gallivanting across the city with a man who possessed the means to devour her barriers as though she'd built them with candy sticks. For that reason alone, she was about to do something completely out of character, dangerous and wholly inappropriate.

She was heading off to Vauxhall Gardens on her own.

As bright ideas went, she supposed it was the least smart thing she'd ever done, but she'd taken a leaf from the earl's book and bribed a particular lord's servants until she discovered the information she required.

The whereabouts of Lord Mormont.

In light of the previous night and after her faculties had once again returned, she had perceived it better to stay as far away from the Earl of Craven as possible. The lingering scent of his cologne on her person and the memory of his scorching kiss had all but reaffirmed that fact.

By Jove! A mere whisper of the echo of his touch and her body tingled with shivers.

For certain, he possessed the means to destroy her carefully erected walls, which would be a damnable thing, because the ultimate tragedy of their relationship would not be death, but love unrequited. After all, the Earl of Craven was not a man who allowed himself much emotion in the first place, and what little he did allow was certainly not the loving kind. He held himself above such frivolous emotion—saw no need for it. At least, that's what Ross had picked up on. And a man such as Craven...one did not dwell on fanciful notions to tame him, to *change* him.

Oh, but that kiss.

Her heart thudded against the sensually wicked memory, a slight groan of regret echoing through her heart. There was no denying this truth: she wanted to kiss him again, wanted to be sheltered in his powerful arms, and wanted him to command her complete surrender.

“Just because one craves chocolate eclairs does not mean that they are good for you,” Ross muttered.

Still, she could not help but dwell on the difference between her departed fiancé and his dearest friend. Alfred had only kissed her on one occasion—the day he left to join the war. It had been a passionate kiss, one that had buckled her knees, sweet in its presentation. Craven did not just kiss though. In fact, the word “kiss” was such a small word for an act that he somehow made so profoundly wicked. No, when Craven’s lips had touched hers, bolts of energy had shot through her, and a sensation of sinful lust had overwhelmed her senses. The kiss had been urgent and hot, her body aching with desire, aching to be enslaved by his hunger. Not only had her legs melted at the caress, but it had also set her entire body aflame.

A remarkable difference.

The only thing Ross was uncertain about—and this was no little thing—was whether she mattered at all in the equation. Surely a kiss depended on the man himself and not the recipient of his kiss? It all came down to skill, did it not? And Craven was exceptionally skilled, was he not? So every woman must feel this way when being kissed by him. Because if that was not the case, then Ross might very well be in trouble.

Better to forget the kiss altogether. In fact, anything intimate surrounding the man would be better left purged from her mind, especially now, when words like desire and lust and love brewed in her head.

Love.

Another fanciful notion.

Rosslyn shook her head. She’d completely lost her marbles.

So, in summary, there existed no possible reason for her to mull over a kiss that happened in the spur of the moment.

Two kisses, she corrected herself.

The earl probably meant to distract her from the carnal scene that had undoubtedly been branded into her mind.

Yes, that made sense. Because anything else was a disaster in the making.

How unfortunate, though, that the images of Lord Lincoln still haunted her subconscious. She’d not even known such acts occurred. For a man to put his member into a woman’s mouth...and Lord Lincoln had enjoyed it!

Perhaps it would not have been so scandalous if Craven had not

stood directly beside her, which had already caused her breath to quicken in the most unexpected way. In response (and she hadn't imagined it) his breath had quickened, as well. And then he'd kissed her for the first time—to *distract me*, she reminded herself.

What if he now believed that she desired him, wanted him, in the way the paramour had desired Lord Lincoln? And while Craven may not allow himself the joys of love, Ross was quite certain he'd not deny himself the pleasure of the act.

What a mess.

That mess was why she had decided to steer clear of him and test the waters on her own tonight. If all went well, she would decide whether to continue as such—without his assistance—or include him once more. Though, she did not want to need the earl's guidance.

Glancing down at her pocket watch, she noted it quarter to twelve. How much longer must she wait? Sparing a glance out of the window of the hackney she'd hired, her impatience marked by a small sigh, she turned the watch over in her hand and studied the engraved lines. A scantily dressed figure of a woman with a bow and arrow decorated the back cover. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt.

Fitting, Ross supposed, being on the hunt tonight and all.

A pretty piece, it was the only item in her possession that had once belonged to Alfred, who had gifted it to her after their first kiss, as a token of his love. Recently the bauble only served to remind her of the world's staggering ability to move on while others become lost in the past.

The sudden slamming of a door brought her up short and she at once peered out of the window, noting a dark shadow move through the night.

It was time.

She clutched at the black cloak that covered her, sending a prayer to the heavens that she would not be recognized. The task of slipping out of her house had proven easy enough, just as she'd suspected it would. Her mother had already retired for the night, having opted out of attending any events when Ross claimed a headache earlier that evening.

The only part of her plan that might falter is the man himself, Lord Mormont. The information she'd received from his scullery maid claimed he would depart for the gardens at about midnight, so the timing was paramount. The only flaw she'd foreseen was if Lord Mormont decided to attend earlier than Ross arrived or not attend at all.

Luckily for her, it seemed that was not the case tonight.

The driver, having been compensated to follow her explicit instructions, set out to trail her quarry. When the hackney next came

to a stop, Ross drew back the curtain to make sure Lord Mormont had indeed left his carriage and jumped from the vehicle in one smooth motion.

Vauxhall Gardens had a reputation for being a lair for reprobates and rakes alike. That still did not mean Lord Mormont was up to no good. Perhaps he enjoyed the acrobats and the fireworks.

As Ross followed him, she drew her cloak tighter about her to conceal her identity. This may be her first return to London since her come out, but better not to take any chances.

In the back of her mind, an unbidden thought arose. It all seemed too easy. That was until she entered the infamous gardens. A mob of people milled about, exuberating loud cheers and cackling laughter assaulting her ears. For one fleeting moment, Ross stood immobile, frozen at the sight of drunken men and women stumbling about on the path, until a body slammed into her and propelled her forward. She nearly tripped over herself to the ground.

“What have we ’ere, love?”

Ross’s head whipped to the man who had suddenly appeared before her and started to grope at her breasts through her cloak, hurting her with his paws. She almost cried out in fright, but then recalled the naked anatomy of Craven’s form and the appendage men so wickedly favored. Sending up a silent prayer that it would work, she lifted her knee straight up into the area where his manhood rested with as much force as she could muster. The man fell forward, clutching at the area, his face turning molten with pain and instant anger.

“You whore! I will beat you for this!”

Ross did not hesitate, only acted. With a burst of speed, she turned on her heel and ran. She dashed off into the crowd, too terrified to glance back over her shoulder. How dare some bounder accost her in such a way! She certainly hadn’t expected anything like that to happen.

What *had* she expected?

The question burned holes through her intellect. Quickening her pace, she searched for Lord Mormont, who had disappeared from her sight. Ross almost began to panic when she spotted his distinct top hat in the distance, moving out of sight and into another path. She bore down on the spot like a woman singularly possessed, afraid that if she even blinked she may lose him.

After turning into the same path, she glimpsed him again in the distance, and a sigh of relief broke free from her lips. Only then did she dare to spare a glance over her shoulder. So far the awful man who had pawed at her hadn’t pursued her. From what she could gather, he still writhed on the ground.

It was then that she admitted the truth to herself: This had been a

mistake.

She should never have ventured into the gardens alone, unprotected. It certainly did not seem worth it now, almost being manhandled by a drunken profligate. Why this sudden pressing need to prove Craven wrong possessed her, she could not in all honesty say. She only knew that it had blinded her to the real risks and potential consequences of her idea to venture to the gardens on her own. Though no good had come of her adventure so far, she still turned and cut corners in an attempt to follow Lord Mormont, too afraid to change course now. She paused when his form disappeared onto an unlit path.

An uneasy twinge burned inside her. It trembled down her spine and set the hairs on her neck on edge. Must she follow or should she call this night a complete failure and return home? It did not seem as though she had much of a choice. Alone, without a suitable escort, and with a man roaming the gardens who had vowed to beat her, it seemed rather prudent to leave and yet if she turned around now and that horrid man found her, she would be defenseless. But then, if something happened she could always cry out. If nothing else, Lord Mormont was a gentleman, and duty bound to protect a woman from being harmed. Dare she take the chance?

What am I to do?

Then anger welled up within her, followed by a burst of courage. By saints, she'd come this far, hadn't she? All she had to do was try and stay close to Lord Mormont and have a plausible excuse prepared if she got caught.

Noting another crooked bend in the path ahead, she approached more cautiously, keeping to the edges. By Jove, it was dark! But even through the darkness, she spotted Lord Mormont instantly. He stood with his back to her, a woman tightly clasped in his arms as he pressed her up against a tree. One hand clamped over the poor girl's mouth; the other fought to lift her skirts as he snarled, "Shut your mouth."

It also occurred to her, albeit a bit too late, that perhaps it would have been prudent to discover the nature of this lord's dark side. What had Craven said? *Another poor choice*. He hadn't exactly elaborated on what he meant by that. Meeting a liaison in a garden was hardly a cause for concern. In fact, men were "required" to sow their wild oats, were they not?

Be as it may, the notion that Lord Mormont had not thought to acquire the *permission* of the woman in such a situation blinded her with rage. In light of what had just happened to her moments before, it was hardly unjustified. So Ross, who had never given much thought on how to overpower a man before entering Vauxhall Gardens, found

that the question suddenly consumed her with such violent force that she saw red.

Glancing around for a weapon of sorts, Ross spied a large branch a few feet away from the couple. She rushed to the fallen limb as stealthy as she was able, snatched it up, and lifted the deceptively heavy branch high above her shoulders. The woman, having spied Ross, started to cry out in warning, but it was too late, Ross whacked Lord Mormont over the head, his body crumbling to the ground in a big heap of male mass.

The woman, rearranging her skirts, stared at her with wide eyes, fear darkening her gaze.

“Are you all right?” Ross asked, her brows creasing together.

The woman said nothing, only retreated a few steps before she swiveled and darted off into the shadows. Ross blinked, staring down at the man then back at the space the woman had occupied only moments before.

A simple “thank you” would have sufficed.

Chapter 11

Torment: the infliction of severe suffering or torture. Or as Lucien had come to think of it, the infliction of Miss Bakersfield's heady scent, designed to rouse the torturous desire to seduce her, causing his days to be plagued with torment.

Even now the faint tangy scent of her perfume clung to the interior of his carriage. And even now, despite the current fury blinding his vision, his body went hard when he inhaled it. At any moment his skin might burst into a million pieces. His perpetual state of arousal burned with awakened passion and unfilled desire.

Rage at her recent deception hurled shards of ice through his veins—not a good combination, considering the burning lust that already simmered within them.

Rosslyn-Bloody-Bakersfield had bested him.

And in an entirely unexpected way.

She'd bribed one of *his* servants. It was unthinkable. And yet that was exactly what she'd done.

She'd wanted to discover his plans for tonight so that he couldn't curtail her foolish adventure, no doubt. If it hadn't been for his footman's guilt and uncertainty of her intentions, Lucien would never have been the wiser. It hadn't taken long to deduce what she was up to after that, however.

Tonight fireworks would light up the sky above Vauxhall Gardens. Normally, that wouldn't mean much, except Lord Mormont never missed the occasion, which further confirmed his suspicion that Miss Bakersfield had set off by herself.

Lucien could not recall a time when he'd been this furious with a woman. That her behavior was his fault did not signify anything. *She* should have known better. But for Christ's sake, he should still have

anticipated this—he *had* been aware she possessed a knack for rebellion. If he hadn't been so caught up in the sweet taste of her mouth, perhaps he'd have contemplated the possibility before now.

All this meant that by the time Lucien entered Vauxhall Gardens, he was ready to relieve someone of his head. The garden boasted more miscreants than usual, a sight that caused fear and concern to slither up alongside his seething anger. He prayed to the Almighty that Miss Bakersfield had not gotten into any trouble.

She'd ventured into it alone.

Without protection.

Without him.

The damn woman had no sense!

He'd be lucky if he found her in this crush. Luckily for her, Mormont's excursions are well known amongst his peers. One could most certainly find him on some unlit path with his rod buried in his mistress.

Lucien assumed the maddening Miss Bakersfield would have been thorough in her inquiries and at the very least possessed some notion of where to search. On that assumption, he headed deeper into the gardens, sidestepped the prostitutes along the way, and kept his senses on high alert. Not only were these paths known for young lovers and their trysts, but with the darkness also came cutthroats and pickpockets.

A string of curses flew from his mouth. He had been the one to set her on this path, triggering a deep curiosity about the men on her list. And by kissing her, he had also handed her a reason to run. Of course, with an excuse to avoid him, she would continue to uncover the true characters on her list without him.

Devil take it, he should never have kissed her, never revealed his hunger.

Overwrought with determination and fury, he started down the first path, venturing deeper into the gardens. He was also prepared to call out her name; her reputation be damned. In fact, Lucien was about to do just that when a distraught woman dashed passed him in a fit of tears.

He paused, staring after the chit with mild intrigue, before heading in the direction she'd come. That's when, a few twists and turns later, he found her.

Lucien blinked at the image he stumbled upon.

Miss Bakersfield stood frozen, in shock, he presumed, clutching a log much too thick for her little hands, looking down at a crumpled figure. The thud of his footsteps must have freed her from her stupor, however, because she whirled around, swinging the log as if to clog him as well. A lifetime of instinct took over. His arm snaked out,

seizing hold of the wooden weapon, and yanked it from her hands.

The unmistakable sound of her breath catching reached his ears.

Lucien cast a disapproving scowl her way, but Miss Bakersfield remained frozen, her hand still clutching an invisible branch mid-air, eyes wide as she stared at him in astonishment.

"Miss Bakersfield, fancy finding you here." He tossed the branch aside, his gaze flicking to the crumpled body of Lord Mormont before locking eyes with her again.

She lowered her arms to her side, her lips parting as if to respond, but no sound emerged.

"Fabulous night for a walk," he continued, glancing up at the sky before his eyes settled on her again. "I see you ran into Mormont, poor chap."

His reference to the man triggered a reaction from her and she glanced down at the motionless figure. "Mother Mary, what have I done?"

"Laid him to the ground, I see."

"That is *not* funny."

"Neither is finding you here."

"I—" she paused, and he raised a brow, his arms folding across his chest.

"It would appear I have made a terrible mistake," she said.

"Do you mean venturing into this godforsaken place alone and *woman*-handling a man? A crime in some countries, I'm certain."

Her hands went to her hips. "Now that is just preposterous. I did not wish to burden you any more than I already have, so I decided to investigate on my own."

Burden him? He snorted.

"Needless to say," she continued, "I came upon him accosting a young woman and I lost my temper," she admitted sheepishly.

That surprised him. "You saved a woman from her own wanton actions?"

"He was groping her!"

Lucien peered down at her, his brows knitting together. Surely after the painting affair, she couldn't be so naïve. But then it hit him. Miss Bakersfield remained as innocent as the day she'd been born, even after witnessing Lincoln. Even after their kiss.

Male possession flared in his gut.

"Miss Bakersfield, Mormont is guilty of nothing except consorting with his mistress, who you probably scared to death in your attack."

"He accosted her! I saw him muting her cry of alarm with his hand!"

"An act, no doubt."

He waited for her to process the information, saw the moment

surprise flashed in her eyes. "His mistress?"

Lucien nodded, a smile tugging at his lips despite his anger. "Poor chit flew past me in a fit of hysterics."

"But, I saw it. He had her pressed up against a tree..."

Lucien knelt to feel for the lord's pulse. "He lives. May have a raging headache when he wakes, however," he glanced up at her, still hunched down on his knees, "Rosslyn, the man is guilty of nothing except loving his mistress with a mad passion. They like to, how do they say, play *roles* where she is a damsel and he the beast."

"He never attacked her?"

He shook his head, his grin widening. "Had you not lost your temper, you'd have seen her delight at his...groping."

"I only lost my temper because I was accosted moments before by a bacchanalian lecher. Oh lord, do you think she might have recognized me?"

Lucien's back stiffened, and he slowly rose to his feet, the beast inside him awakening. "You were accosted? By whom?" he said, his voice a soft whisper of deadly retaliation.

"Oh, it's nothing, and I'd rather not think about that awful experience."

"It's not nothing. Who the hell accosted you?"

"It's of no consequence now," she said, giving him a look. A look that made him want to throttle her. The damn woman tied him up in knots.

"I will not ask again, Miss Bakersfield. Who accosted you?"

"How in devil's name am I supposed to know? The important thing is that I got away from him, is it not?" Her eyes flashed.

"Got away from him how?" he snapped.

"I kicked him in the groin if you must know," her voice whipped back, that familiar spark he loved entering her gaze.

A wave of calm reassurance settled over him—she was alive, unharmed, and ready to battle him again. With panic all but gone, there was now only righteous anger in its wake. Anger that she had placed herself in harm's way, ignorant of the dangers, all because she claimed herself to be a burden to him.

He took a purposeful step forward, stepping over the unconscious man at their feet. All good judgment scattered at the sight of her wide, artless emerald eyes, which were staring up at him, entrancing him. To hell with caution, to hell with reservations, to hell with it all.

He gripped her by the waist and pushed her up against the tree Lord Mormont lay crumbled beneath, lifting her skirts and trailing his hand up her leg, even as his head lowered to devour the exposed flesh of her bosom.

The sharp inhalation of her breath only spurred him on. He pulled

her tigher to him, his tongue darting out to lick the entire length of her neck. He could feel her heart racing against his chest, hear her breath quickening with desire.

He chuckled at her gasp of outrage.

“Let me go!”

He clamped a hand over her mouth. “Is this what you saw?” he whispered into her ear.

“Nnnn—”

Unable to wait a moment longer, he cut her off with a kiss. He needed to feel her lips beneath his, needed to taste her, needed *more* of her. She stiffened against him for a moment, but then a quaking shiver passed through her and suddenly she was kissing him back, mimicking the motions of his tongue and teeth and mouth. It was at this moment that awareness came full force, that another had dared touch her. He broke the kiss.

“Where did the man touch you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” her voice croaked, her eyes half-masted and heavy with desire.

He shook his head, something inside him snapping. “Where?” he demanded, fury and desire swirling inside him. His hands tightened on her hips, not gentle in their groping just then.

“My breasts,” her soft reply came.

His hands slid up her ribs to caress those precious mounds, cradling their fullness his hands. Time ceased to exist in that moment. A groan escaped her then, but his own muted it. He wanted her to forget the other man’s foul touch. He wanted much more than he could ever have.

Her lips parted, and she clutched at his jacket, urging her body more tightly against his. His heart lurched at her naked desire, a shiver of pure rapture hammering through his body as his gut clenched—*clenched* for Christ’s sakes—in response.

A battle waged inside him, one where he had to fight every instinct not to drag her back to his home and his bed where he could ravish her until they both went up in flames.

Then the moment passed. She shoved at his chest. Hard.

“Let me go,” she exclaimed.

If it hadn’t been for the panic in her voice, Lucien might not have found the strength. He fought with his inner beast, won, and simply lifted his hands, stepping away from her. A ragged, constrained breath tore from his lips. All he wanted to do was hike up her skirt and plunge his—

Her slap jerked him out of his fantasy.

“What the bloody hell was that for?”

Her back straightened as if he was the one in the wrong. “Your

uncalled for behavior, sir!"

Sir, was it now? His eyes took on a mocking glint. "You kissed me back."

"I did not!"

"You did. *Thrice*. But I do not blame you, Miss Bakersfield. I would have kissed me back, too, if I were a little thing like you."

At her indignant gasp, he chuckled and clasped her hand in his. "Come now, Rosslyn, admit you enjoyed my lips against yours."

She snatched her hand away, her anger fading to that of mild exasperation. "You are shameful."

"Calling the kettle black, my dear."

She glanced to the ground, searching for another branch, he presumed with wry amusement. A painful groan reminded them of the figure sprawled on the ground and their eyes flicked to Lord Mormont.

"Whatever shall we do now, my dear?" Lucien murmured when she lifted her eyes back up at him.

"You are supposed to save me now," she bit out.

Warmth spread through him like rays of sunlight piercing through thick dark clouds. His smirk was that of arrogant triumph, he was sure. But Lucien was not a man to gloat, so instead of further taunting her, he turned on his heel and strolled away, expecting her to follow him, of course.

Ross stared at the back of the man who had just devoured her body and consumed her senses like a man possessed. It certainly felt as though he'd possessed *her*. Her lips were swollen, branded by the mark of his passion, and her body burned for his touch. She glanced down at her person, certain sparks of embers would adorn her cloak like glittering fireflies. It still astonished her how in one breath the man had robbed her of hers, left her shivering, and wanting more.

"I should blister your behind for taking such risks with your life."

She inwardly scoffed at his muttered words, still unsettled at the sudden flush in her cheeks, the heat in her midriff, the tingling of her skin where he'd touched her—beguiled her.

Then his imperious words invaded her hazy mind, and her eyes narrowed to shoot daggers into his back. What nerve!

"Do not speak to me as if I am a child. You have made your point, even though I am perfectly capable of looking after myself."

He arched a brow, sparing her a pointed look over his shoulder before his eyes flicked to the body they were leaving behind.

"A slight setback in my plan."

"Slight? It seems like a hell of a thing to refer to as a setback. You could have been manhandled, *killed*, and I may not have found you in time!" he exploded, whirling around to loom over her, the rush of his

anger causing her head to spin.

Ross blinked. This man was turning her inside out—her life, her resolve, and all her choices for a husband. She said nothing, not allowing him to intimidate her, holding his gaze until he turned on his heel and once more made his way down the path. She deserved his ire, given that she *had* whacked Lord Mormont over the head for a tryst with his mistress—a thing that would never have happened if she hadn't been dead set on discovering the truth on her own.

She followed him down the path, aware of his big frame on a heightened scale. It was hard not to get caught up in the angry stride of his long legs, his stiff back, and his rigid shoulders as he glided over the dirt in his polished boots.

She must have made an appreciative sound because he glanced over his shoulder. "Something amuses you?"

Only your magnificent male body.

"I somehow imagined you to be madder when you discovered my ruse."

"That you considered my anger in advance gives me more pleasure than you know."

His pomposity made her want to bite down on her hand. "How *did* you find me?"

"You attempted to bribe one of my servants."

She made a mental note never to trust his staff again. "I did not attempt. I accomplished."

"Yet, here I am."

"That does not say much about your character."

"Neither does it say much of yours," he shot back.

Ross didn't argue, feeling somewhat foolish. After all, the man had a point. She'd been accosted, could have been forced to endure despicable things, and all because she'd thought herself to be invincible.

Nitwit would be the word to describe her earlier state of mind. The fact also remained that his claims of these men had so far held true. That did not sit well with her. She had always prided herself on being a good, if not impeccable, judge of character.

"I admit my fault in this night, but it's neither here nor there. I shall not wander off on my own again."

"What madness possessed you to do so in the first place?"

The mad possession of Rosslyn Bakersfield by the Earl of Craven.

A fair question indeed, but not a question she could answer without seeming foolish, however. His eyes pierced her once more, attempting to draw the answer from her with the mere pull of his gaze.

Masking her expression to that of complete innocence, she blinked up at him. "My body was commandeered by a ghostly fiend."

His lips twitched. "How horrific."

They exited the gardens without any incident.

"If you will just escort me to my hackney, I shall make it home from there."

Now, why had she gone and said that?

The full force of those blue eyes chilled her to the bone.

"You hired a hackney? By yourself?"

"Hardly a crime. Of course, I couldn't very well dance my way to the gardens."

"Funny, Miss Bakersfield. Do you have any sense in that country head of yours?"

Ross waived his insult aside. "I'm sure about as much sense as you have shown."

His brows almost lifted to his hairline. "How—bloody—so?"

"You approached me first, did you not?"

Chapter 12

Lord Harry Spencer, *a known troublemaker*. Or, as Rosslyn had believed, a distinguished gentleman of high principles and honorable repute.

Now, which is it?

Lord Harry was the most improbable of the whole lot to commit any of the atrocious deeds she had glimpsed this past week—or indeed to commit any at all. And as it so happened, he was also the last name on her list.

The blasted earl, who must be beside himself with delight, had left her torn between a predisposition to scratch the young lord off her list, given what he'd proven with the others, and an urge to demand that he elucidate on his wooly remark. At the moment, as she studied Lord Harry from across the ballroom, where he was dancing with a wallflower (his sixth one to be exact), Ross leaned toward the latter rather than the former.

Still, indecision faltered her step. On the one side stood Craven with his arrogant hide and his so-far-accurate claims, and on the other side, Lord Harry with his reputation, which as far as Ross could tell was as polished as her mother's silver. Not one speck of dirt. Not even the print of a finger.

Why then, would Craven have said what he said?

A known troublemaker.

Ross scoffed.

There was nothing known about any trouble Lord Harry had courted in the past or present. Either Craven was wrong on his account or Lord Harry was even more accomplished at hiding his perversities. But again, if a “known troublemaker” danced with every wallflower in attendance, what trouble could he possibly stir?

Ross watched as he lowered his chocolate-colored head and whispered something into the shy girl's ear. Even from where she observed, the delighted giggles reached her ears. She could imagine the young woman feeling like the most beautiful lady in attendance in Lord Harry's arms.

Her eyes drifted away from the couple in search of a particular wickedly handsome earl. Had he been wrong or simply purposefully vague on the matter of Lord Harry? Perhaps there was nothing wrong with Lord Harry except that Craven opposed him. But why? She could think of no motive for the earl.

"Miss Bakersfield."

The sharp whip of her name from the hostess's lips, Lady Canturbury, brought her back to the present and she turned, her eyes widening in surprise. Beside Lady Canturbury stood the supposed rapscallion lord himself, a wolfish smile stretched across his face.

"Miss Bakersfield," their hostess piped up again, "may I introduce Lord Harry Spencer? Lord Harry, Miss Rosslyn Bakersfield."

"My Lord," Ross murmured with a curtsy, extending her gloved hand.

He wrapped his fingers around hers, his touch gentle. "Miss Bakersfield, enchanted," he said, before releasing her hand under the scrutiny of their hostess.

Lady Canturbury gave a curt nod, as though she'd done her part and now could not wait to be elsewhere. "Well then, I will leave you two to get," she glanced between the two of them, "acquainted."

Lord Harry's gleaming gaze never left Ross's as he murmured, "Thank you ever so much, Lady Canturbury."

Ross blinked at the older woman retreating before her gaze returned to Lord Harry, whose eyes were alive with merriment. The music started up again, this time a waltz, and she wondered whether he planned on asking her to dance or just stand gawking the entire night.

Then he leaned toward her, his smile deepening as he said, "Miss Bakersfield, I could not help note you haven't taken a whirl on the floor night. Perhaps you will honor me with this dance?"

Ross's lips parted to accept but paused midway. It occurred to her then that perhaps he believed her to be a wallflower, without any suitors. Had she just become a charitable chore?

"Miss Bakersfield?" he murmured, clasping his arms behind his back, rocking on the heels of his boots. "It is fine if you haven't mastered the craft yet. I have sturdy toes."

"Of course I have!" she exclaimed, horrified he may think such a thing.

"Then shall we dance?"

"I would be delighted," she murmured, taking his offered arm with

a silent vow to at least try and not tread on his toes.

"So, my dear," he began, after he'd guided her into a steady rhythm, "I have been feeling your stare burning holes through me the entire night. Dare I believe I've captured your interest?"

Ross quashed the sudden inappropriate bout of laughter that threatened to escape from the irony of it all. She was interested yes, to delve and uncover, certainly not in the way he meant. "I admit I am intrigued, my lord. You have danced with every wallflower present."

His chuckle was rich with mirth as if she'd just imparted the wittiest repartee.

"I do not see what is so amusing," she murmured.

"You are, Miss Bakersfield. Surely a lady such as yourself has better things to do than attempt to decipher the motives behind my actions."

She sent him a crooked smile. "It so happens that I do not."

He pulled her a touch closer than was appropriate, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "I have heard tales that you are in the market for a husband. Am I to assume I've made your list? Am I to expect a manner of courtship?"

What?

She gazed at him as if he were daft and, for the first time since their introduction, Ross felt uncertain. Could it be that Lord Harry suffered from some sort of mental disorder?

"You have mistaken my gender, my lord," Ross murmured, her laughter hollow. "Ladies do not court gentlemen."

"Such a pity, that."

Ross glanced nervously to the side, willing the dance to end.

"You strike me as a woman who knows what she wants."

She did?

Their eyes locked and again uncertainty prevailed. Did Lord Harry mean to mock her or compliment her? She decided to voice her reply in a detached tone, wishing him to wonder at her thoughts, "How nice of you to point it out."

He tilted his head to the side and winked at her. "Did I make this grand list of yours?"

Her flush betrayed her words with their ruby-red color. "That is absurd; there is no list."

A twinkle entered his golden eyes. "By gods, you *do* have a list!"

"You cannot possibly tell."

"You're not denying it, interesting," he murmured, effortlessly twirling her about.

"Would there be any point? Besides, you cannot prove it."

"Probably not," he leaned closer until their faces almost touched. "I am, however, an excellent judge of character."

"In which case, you will know whether or not you obtained a spot

on my supposed list.” If he was such a good judge of character, would he be able to tell of her recent exploits? She refused to believe his capabilities stretched that far.

“That is why you are so engrossed with me; I shall not believe otherwise.”

“Perhaps I mean only to ferret out any undesirable traits you may possess.”

His eyes glinted. “Naturally, since I made your list. Did the other men come up to scratch?”

“Perhaps you were always at the top.”

Those perceptive eyes held no scorn when he murmured, “How long have you been in London, Miss Bakersfield?”

“Just over a week.”

“And we have only been introduced now, at *my* request,” he said, alluding to their introductions moments before.

“Point taken,” she said, returning his smile. “Perhaps I do not rank my preference, after all.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Are we all the same to you, then?”

She allowed her voice to drop to a mischievous note as she replied. “We all have our vices, I suppose, which does not mean we aren’t all equally bad or good.”

“So stealing a hairpin will still result in the same punishment as seducing a young beautiful innocent?”

Her brows knit together in puzzlement. “I should hope not.”

“Marriage over a hairpin, would that not be a tale to tell,” he murmured in a rich chuckle.

“Certainly not if Lord Lincoln steals it,” she muttered, the words slipping out of her mouth before she could stop it. She could not even cover her hand over her lips, as was her first instinct, for Lord Harry’s grip tightened as if anticipating the action.

“My dear Miss Bakersfield, tell me you have not been associating with that depraved lecher?”

She shrugged. “The world seems to adore his paintings.”

“But you know better?” he pressed.

“I’ve heard rumors,” she hedged. His eyes were round, and she could tell he wanted to laugh. Indeed, he fought a losing battle. “Oh, laugh. I can see you want to.”

His facial muscles contorted comically at her putout expression moments before he convulsed with laughter.

“Am I to assume he came into consideration?” he said after his laughter had subsided.

“If he had, he certainly will not anymore.”

He chuckled, a deeper version of his earlier laugh. “What nefarious deeds have you uncovered about me?”

“Only that you are far too presumptuous.”

“And I have a deep yearning to dance with wallflowers,” he murmured teasingly.

“Yes, and that.”

“Since I have already been labeled with presumption, might I point out that perhaps you do not know what it is that you want at all and as a result are grasping for straws?”

Presumptuous, indeed!

“I am not grasping at anything,” she snapped.

“You are dancing with me.”

He twirled her about and Ross had to catch her breath before she could reply to his observation.

“You are hardly a straw.”

“You have been gawking my way the entire evening.”

Her heated flush was enough of an answer, but still, she bit out between clenched teeth, “I was just pondering what you were about.”

Those merry eyes glittered with sport. Apparently, nothing offended Lord Harry and he said, “Miss Bakersfield, a word of advice: If you look closely enough at anyone, you will find something to scorn.”

“Your point?”

“Be careful not to gaze too closely for too long or you may find the beasts, which lurk in all men, may start to stare back.”

A shiver raced across her skin. Lord Harry had inadvertently confessed he could be as beastly as the best of them—if tested. Did that mean Craven had been correct? What did he know of Lord Harry’s beast?

“Sound advice, indeed, my lord.”

“I do hope I have not offended you?” the young lord drawled, his tone remote.

She stared into his bright eyes, wondering what secrets such an imposing man could possibly hide. At first glance, he seemed to possess more of a boyish charm, a happy countenance, and a relaxed nature that could win over even the shyest wallflower. Dressed only in expensive finery, Ross suspected every item was expertly chosen to dazzle. But upon closer inspection, very close inspection, one could glimpse the hard edge of a man who did not suffer fools.

They slowed to a standstill as the music came to a halt.

“It has been a pleasure, my lord,” she murmured, swiftly taking a step away from him.

“The pleasure, Miss Bakersfield, has been all mine,” he murmured, his mask of care-free lord back in place as he delivered her to her mother, who appeared charmed with his wit. Even Ross had a hard time remaining focused on what she’d glimpsed as he playfully jested with her mother.

He turned to her. "My lady, I hope it is not too forward of me to ask, but would you like to take a turn about the park tomorrow?"

"She would love to!" Her mother exclaimed.

"Mother!" Ross's wide eyes flicked to her guardian in shock. She had not decided whether she wanted to form a friendship with the man.

"Splendid!" Lord Harry exclaimed. "I shall pick her up tomorrow at noon."

Ross did not know what vexed her more, that he spoke of her in the third person or that they would drive through the park at noon when all the *crème de la crème* would witness his attention.

With a dramatic salute, Lord Harry turned and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Ross to stand rigidly still, glaring daggers at his devil-may-care back.

What had just happened? No sooner had she reflected on Lord Harry's behavior in silent contemplation, and then she'd been embraced in a dance with him. Now she was taking a turnabout in the park on the morrow when she still grappled with what she'd glimpsed below his mask.

"What a charming young lad," her mother gushed.

"I, however, remain suspicious."

"Oh, do not sound so put out, Rosslyn. You could do much worse than a man like him and since you scared off the Earl of Craven—"

Ross whirled to her mother. "I did not scare him off!"

"Then why has he not come to call again?"

Fair question, but the answer was rather simple: He had never meant to court her.

"Craven and I have no attachment whatsoever, mother."

Regardless of their affections or lack thereof, he had been uncommonly silent these past few days. Did he not wish to prove her wrong about Lord Harry?

Ross shook her head.

It would be arrogant to assume her matrimonial matters were more important than attending to estate matters and all that. Why had he even taken the time to bother with her at all?

Her mother was right—she could do worse than the mysterious Lord Harry.

Chapter 13

The following day, Lucien arrived on Miss Bakersfield's doorstep at exactly quarter past one. Despite his best efforts to wipe her from his mind, she'd continued to haunt his dreams, his days, and, when he could not sleep, his ceiling. He thought of those alluring emerald eyes, always tempting him to her side, always seducing him with their spark. The tiny freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose, hinting at the mysteries of her body. But his best-loved feature was her lips. They were the perfect symmetry of fullness, sweet, pliant, and enticing to the point of obsession. The delicate taste of honey chiseled into his mind with vivid clarity. He had no means to fend off the mental images. The confounded woman was stamped so hard into his memory that it felt as if she had been carved into his very bones.

After Vauxhall, he had a man keep an eye on her and report to him anytime she left the house. For his own piece of mind, he maintained. He still died a hundred deaths at the thought of what might have happened in the gardens.

Then an hour ago, word arrived that she had accompanied Lord Harry Spencer on a turnabout in Hyde Park. They must have been introduced at Lady Canturbury's ball, the one he opted to miss because he detested the hostess. She'd wished to worm her way into his bed for quite some time.

Lucien shifted his weight from one foot to another, a low, irritated growl rattling in his chest. Now regret clenched his gut. In the past week, he had not found anything disturbing or remotely distasteful about Lord Harry. In fact, from what he could tell, the man was the perfect gentleman. At least, perfect in the sense that no noteworthy rumor surrounded the man. But just because Lucien hadn't discovered something that marked the young lord as anything less than perfect,

that did not mean he was convinced.

Not even when the butler informed him the ladies would receive him did his mood improve. If anything the air around him grew stifling and oppressive in response.

“Lord Craven,” the baroness preened as he entered the drawing room. “How marvelous of you to call upon us!”

At the baroness’s enthusiastic greeting, his spirits lifted. Somewhat. At least someone was happy to see him. Then he noted the other male in the room. He stiffened, and the air thickened until Lucien believed a torturous suffocation would be his end. Inhaling a deep breath, he forced his muscles to relax with a supreme effort of will.

“Lady Amelia, as always, you are a vision,” he murmured, inclining his head to the lady.

The older woman giggled. “Oh stop, you rogue, and please, join us for tea.”

Lucien resisted the urge to lift his hand and tug at his cravat. His skin was stretched taut and he felt out of place. Battle he understood. Battle he welcomed. This, whatever this was, was something altogether different. It did not feel as though he belonged here, sitting in a room with two beautiful ladies, sipping tea.

You don’t belong here.

With a curt nod, he took a seat—one that positioned him directly across from Miss Bakersfield and her young pup. Their eyes locked and he studied every nuance of her expression, held her gaze until a lovely rosy flush spread across her cheeks.

“Miss Bakersfield,” he drawled in acknowledgment.

Her response was drowned out by a louder voice, that of Lord Harry’s. “Craven, I do not believe we have been properly introduced.”

Fathomless eyes engaged with golden ones. Of course, they hadn’t. Lucien was a wolf, a beast capable of being ruthless and without mercy, whereas Lord Harry represented a jackal, a cunning little cretin, clever, but not quite as savage.

“Horses run around the corral, children run around the tree,” was all Lucien said.

The women exchanged uncertain glances.

Lord Harry’s eyes narrowed, a stony edge entering them. “I was not aware you were a friend of the family’s.”

A small cynical smile carved into Lucien’s stony countenance. So the young pup sported claws after all.

“Oh, he is more than that!” the baroness exclaimed. “He was the best friend of Rosslyn’s departed fiancé, bless his soul.”

“Mother!”

“What dear? It’s not like your engagement to our cherished Alfred was a secret.”

"That is beside the point, mother. It is rude to speak of the dead in polite company."

"Oh, hush. If we don't speak of the dead, how else are we to keep Alfred's memory alive?"

Lucien watched as Miss Bakersfield's cheeks reddened in embarrassment, her eyes refusing to meet his. He also noted from the corner of his eye that Lord Harry was piercing him with a scrutinizing stare.

"Would you like some biscuits?" the baroness asked, holding out the tray after she handed him his tea.

"Surely the earl has better things to do with his time," Rosslyn pointed out.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Bakersfield, there is no other place I'd rather be than enjoying tea in such enchanting company." His lids narrowed as he smirked. Christ, she was dazzling.

"Oh!" her mother gushed.

"And we, in turn, are in the company of a war hero," Lord Harry piped up.

Lucien pierced him with a fierce glower, not fooled by his cheerful appearance. "I am no hero. I am, however, surprised you are aware of my time at war. My enlistment is not widely known."

"Perhaps not widely, but it is known."

Lucien lifted a big shoulder in an indolent shrug. As always, thoughts about his time abroad burned him like a scalding hot blade. His face, however, remained coolly remote. It was the one thing Alfred had always been envious of him, his ability to separate his feelings from his actions. Being an immensely private man, he preferred to grieve in silence, away from probing eyes. He had never allowed himself to get caught up in the horrors of his past, hadn't enabled it to consume him. It would not undo the war nor would it bring his friend back. What did he care whatever Lord Harry's knowledge pertained?

"So, my lord, to what do we owe the pleasure?"

Pulled from his ruminations by Miss Bakersfield's smooth and silky voice, his eyes circled back to her. It seemed he was to be pushed aside for a whelp. And speaking of which, he raked her with a saucy look, his upper lip twitching.

"I have come upon some puppies, Irish wolfhounds, I believe, and the most darling creatures are in need of loving homes."

Her eyes widened fractionally, a spark of anger flashing in their depth. He did not care. He would wield her affection for the pups shamelessly over her, if necessary. The "why" of his actions remained safely tucked away inside a box somewhere deep in his mind.

"Why that is so charitable of you, Lord Craven!" the baroness

chirped. "Unfortunately, I have no tolerance for animal hide. It is why Rosslyn never owned pets as a child."

"That is a shame," Lucien agreed.

"I will take a puppy," Lord Harry announced and all eyes turned on him.

A muscle leaped in Lucien's jaw.

"Are you certain an Irish wolfhound is the right dog for you, Lord Harry? They need a rather large amount of food and attention," Miss Bakersfield said.

"I'm quite fond of animals," Lord Harry said in response, waggling his brows at her. "I am owned by a rather fat ginger cat, who demands I labor tirelessly to keep him fed and well provided for. But I suspect a little challenge to his throne would get him into shape in no time."

Lord Harry cast a wicked grin her way, setting Lucien's nerves on edge.

By gods, was he *jealous*?

Disbelief had struck him momentarily speechless and he stared at the couple, his face expressionless. The moment stretched but for a second. At their continued banter, annoyance sparked life back into his quiescent state.

"Excellent, that leaves only three puppies," he drawled, pleased to see Miss Bakersfield's gaze whipping back to his.

"Three!" she exploded, causing both her mother and Lord Harry to slide a curious glance her way.

"Are you aware how big they get, Miss Bakersfield? And we have seven of them."

Her eyes widened at the use of the word 'we' and Lucien grinned.

"Who have you charged with their care?" she asked, her voice mirroring the same amount of annoyance that dwelled within him.

"Rosslyn! What has gotten into you, dear?" her mother said. "I'm sure the earl has done a marvelous job in finding them homes."

"I mean only that it is terrible they do not all have homes yet. What happens if the other three don't find keepers?"

Lucien tilted his head to the side, his brows gathering in thought. "I suppose I will donate them to Scotland Yard."

"But that's inhumane!"

"How so, Miss Bakersfield?"

The baroness and Lord Harry were now watching the exchange, the baroness with avid interest and Lord Harry with suspicion.

"They will be used to catch criminals!"

"And crime-fighting dogs are cruel? I rather imagined them to be helpful."

"Puppies need *loving* homes—a concept foreign to you, I suppose—not cages where they are taught to track and hunt."

“Rosslyn,” her mother interrupted, “that was unforgivably rude, apologize to the earl at once.”

Lucien shifted in his chair, unconcerned. “No need, madam. A lady should never apologize for something she is passionate about, even though society might expect it.”

Her mother cast Craven an uncertain look, biting her lip in a nervous gesture. “How kind of you, my lord,” she murmured, still unconvinced.

Abruptly he stood. It was time for him to leave. The fashion plate of a popinjay had inched closer to the beguiling Miss Bakersfield. To bait Lucien, no doubt. Already the air surrounding him thickened with tension. “I best return home as I’m expecting the new masters of the pups to collect them today.”

Miss Bakersfield jumped to her feet at once. “I will see you out,” she said, and at two curious stares, she continued, “as means to apologize for my rude behavior.”

Lucien nodded and bid his adieu to Lord Harry and her mother, before following her out as she marched past him. When they reached the front door, she whirled on him, crossing her arms over her chest. “What are you doing?” she hissed.

Lucien arched a brow in response.

“Those are my puppies!”

“Perhaps you have not heard the expression that ‘possession is eleven points in the law, and they say there are but twelve.’”

She bristled. Lucien could tell by the deepening color of her skin and the flush creeping down the slender arch of her neck that he’d flustered her. *Good.*

“As I recall, you wanted to leave them in that horrid place and now you are giving them away!”

“To loving homes, Miss Bakersfield, as you so aptly put it they deserve.”

“That is not the point!”

Bloody hell, she was glorious in her state of furious indignation. He could not have stopped himself then even if hell itself rained brimstones down upon him. Both hands framing her face, his lips crushed down on hers in a wild flaming kiss. His mouth moved over hers, his tongue darting out to coax them apart. When her lips parted in a gasp of protest, Lucien growled, a low guttural sound, as his tongue claimed the sweet cavern of her mouth, flicking, stroking, and caressing.

Every male impulse flared to life at their contact, reaffirming the connection both of them refused to concede to. A predatory instinct, a near irresistible compulsion, urged him to claim her fully, urged him to cross a line he could never come back from.

He wanted her more than he had ever wanted any bloody thing in his life.

Slowly, he became aware of her kissing him back. Not with the soft mimic of a virgin's tentative tongue, but with the same savage intensity with which he conquered the plains of her mouth. He was setting them both on fire.

That was the moment it dawned on him. This attraction was exactly what she *didn't* want. She might enjoy playing with fire now, but not forever. She wanted a temperate husband, docile even. She wanted a comfortable marriage. She'd said as much, and he was taking that away from her. Because, in the end, Rosslyn would never be happy with a man like him—a beast with a hardened shell and a burning passion who was incapable of a quiet, consistent love. It was as if he'd been dumped in the Thames in the heart of winter, soaked with the cold realization of the truth.

He tore away from her as if she'd charred his flesh. Turning his back to her, he battled to gather his control, his hands fisting at his sides. Her response to his hunger confused the hell out of him.

“Lucien?”

His name. On her lips.

Purred in that soft, husky voice.

It was too much. With a curse he commanded his feet to carry him out, away from her, not once looking back.

Chapter 14

A grand exit had always been a thing to be admired. It had all the elements of good theater—mystery, intrigue, and a captivated audience. At times, depending on the circumstance, a grand exit could become a thing of comedy: a pickled duke falling over his own feet, a lady leaving in a fit of pique, a face covered in Madeira. But more often than not, grand exits transformed into disgraceful exits: two brawling men, fighting over a woman; an old fodder in his cups, being carried out by his friends; or, God forbid, two ladies scuffling over a gentleman's attentions.

As far as exits go, the Earl of Craven's had been sublime. He had left his audience (of one) flustered, uncertain, and deeply confused.

Ross gaped at the empty spot Lucien had just occupied, still dazed from his kiss, and promptly burst into tears.

She had cried for all but a minute before the maelstrom of emotions settled within her. Then she directed the whirling pool of confusion to one emotion that would serve her better: anger.

Curse his hide! For a fleeting moment, when she'd been anchored in his powerful embrace, she had wondered what it would be like to call this wildly untamed man hers. What would it be like to wake up next to him every morning? Would he change, become more civilized once married, or would the one lucky enough to snare his heart abandon all ties to polite society and acquiescent to the burning passion of the untamed soul?

But how silly of her!

It had taken all her strength to compose herself and return to finish tea with her mother and Lord Harry. An hour later, after feigning a headache and excusing herself, she had snatched her cloak and dashed off into the street with one purpose in mind: to sever the link that

bound her to the oafish earl *now*. The puppies. Peter the Great.

She found him leaning against the dark mahogany desk of his study, the puppies in a box at his feet. He cradled one of those puppies in his arms, an unusual look of cheerfulness stamped on his face. Beside him stood a polished lord, impeccably dressed in navy trousers and a bottle-green jacket, which stood out sharply in contrast with Lucien's black attire. Ross recognized him instantly as the man at the soiree, though his name eluded her at the moment. In his arms, he, too, cradled a pup.

The door had been left slightly ajar, just enough for her to glimpse them. They had yet to spot her, too engrossed in their fondling of the puppies. She pinched her lips. *Males*.

She thought back to Craven's exit, her temper rising once again at his audacity to kiss her utterly senseless and then leave without so much as a parting word.

By the mother that birthed Christ, for all women alive, she would not only have a grand exit but an even grander entrance.

Clenching her jaw, her eyes alight with fire, she lifted her skirts and struck out her booted foot, kicking the door all the way open. The loud crash against the wood-paneled wall caused both men to jump, a string of curses flying from their lips as their gazes swung to her. The puppies started to wail.

Ross entered the room, drawing strength from her temper.

"By saints," the other man exclaimed. "Who is this wild goddess?"

"Miss Rosslyn Bakersfield in all her glorious fury," Lucien said.

This time it was her fists that clenched tightly at her sides.

She directed her glower at the other man. "And who are you, sir?" she snapped.

"*He*," Lucien drawled in a soft purr, "is the Earl of Westfield."

Inwardly, Ross cringed. What the man must think of her! But she dared not let her anger slip now.

"Here to pilfer one of my pups, I imagine," her voice whipped out.

"They are not," Lucien barked, then caught himself when the puppy in his arm started to squirm in upset, "your puppies," he finished in a softer, more solemn tone.

"Nevertheless, I have come to collect them all, before you thrust them into the unfeeling arms of Scotland Yard!"

"Scotland Yard?" the other earl murmured, lifting a brow at Lucien, whose cheeks flushed.

"It's a long story," he muttered.

"There is no story!" Ross snapped, pointing at Westfield. "Unhand Marcus the Magnificent, sir!"

Instead of putting the puppy down, he clutched it more tightly against his chest.

“Marcus the Magnificent?” Lucien growled. “You *named* them?”

He must have noted her hesitation for he barked, “When?”

Her ire rose. “After I came to call on them for the first time if you must know.” Her eyes narrowed on the pup in his arms, “Now hand me Edmund the Spectacular at once!”

The other earl inhaled a deep breath, shaking his head. “Saints, man, what did you do to this woman?”

“He defiled me!”

The moment the declaration sprang into creation Ross regretted the careless words. They’d come out wrong. She had only meant he’d defiled her list, her naïve outlook on the world. Not her person.

She watched in growing horror as Lucien’s face hardened into a dark thundercloud. Merciless retaliation entered his gaze. A glance at Westfield confirmed the man’s eyes had narrowed on her in suspicion, his sharp gaze taking nothing for granted.

Later she would scold herself for her utter lack of wisdom in her phrasing. But for now, she’d be damned if she did not accomplish the task she set out to do over a few ill-chosen words.

She marched forward, both men stilling, uncertain as to her intentions. The moment she reached out to snatch the box of puppies, Lucien sprang forward and seized two more from the box, leaving her with three.

Seething, she snapped, “Give them back!”

He matched her glower with a hard one of his own. “I have already promised them new homes.”

“I am their home! Where is Peter the Great?”

“Who is Peter the Great?” Westfield muttered more to himself than to them.

“You are not taking Pete,” Lucien snarled.

“His name is not *Pete* and I am taking him back.”

The man’s shoulders bunched and he took a menacing step forward, but Ross refused to retreat, standing her ground.

“Rosslyn, if you remove my dog from my home I will put the authorities on you.”

She gasped. “You wouldn’t dare!”

He took another threatening step toward her, his eyes roaming the length of her body in such a fashion Ross straightened her back, unable to stop the deep shade of red coloring her skin.

“Oh, I dare. If you so much as take a leash to him and walk him out of *his* home, I will have you thrown in prison before you can pronounce that ridiculous name you’ve saddled him with.”

“He is my dog!”

“Not according to Alfred’s will and, in case you have forgotten, thieving is a punishable offense.”

"I will get him back," Ross bit out. "One way or another."

"And where will you take him? Where are you taking those whelps? Your mother suffers allergies. I, at least, have provided most of them with homes."

"Once I marry—"

"And when will that be, Miss Bakersfield? As I have supposedly *defiled* you. I don't see any suitors storming your stronghold."

She couldn't stop herself from flinching at that. "Lord Harry—"

"Is as much of a whelp as these puppies—Harry the Harrificent!" he growled.

Ross gasped, enraged, and commented on the first thought that came to mind. "That is not even a name!"

"Harry the Coxcomb, then," he further goaded her.

"Lord Harry Spencer?" Westfield chirped in. "Good fellow—"

Lucien shot the earl a glare and he shut his mouth mid-sentence, before continuing, "Put the box of puppies down, Miss Bakersfield."

"Never!" she exploded, leaving them standing in stunned, altogether furious puzzlement. Then she whirled, rushing from the room before he could snatch the remaining puppies from her. Though she did not glance back, a strange satisfaction filled her.

A grand exit, indeed.

"Well, that was interesting."

Lucien set the puppies on the floor and swiped a palm over his face, cursing beneath his breath. His heart pounded against the inside of his chest so hard it hurt. Unbuttoning his shirt collar and cuffs, he inhaled a deep breath, willed his mind to calm and his muscles to relax. Gods but the woman tested his patience.

"Interesting is not the word I'd have chosen to describe this mess."

The Earl of Westfield arched a thick blond brow. "I trust, for your own safety, you did not tarnish that little spitfire's reputation?"

Lucien scoffed. "I'd have to be mad, wouldn't I?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether that creature is worth keeping your toes in a pinch."

"She wants an amenable husband, a bland marriage," he admitted.

"That woman wants neither."

"And you are an expert in what women want, correct?"

"Obviously not, but if Miss Bakersfield wanted pliant and mild, she would not be barging into your home unchaperoned. This not being the only time, I'd wager."

His words caused Lucien's brows to draw together. *Could that be true?*

"Do not take too long, or that fiery passion will be displayed in

another man's bed."

Lucien growled in protest at the idea of her enjoying carnal pleasures with another man. With Lord Harry. Rubbing the back of his neck, he felt the tension rise again. He shot Westfield a menacing look.

The man held up a puppy in mock surrender. "No need for violence, old chap. Now, tell me how you met, as Belle will be dying of curiosity."

"Your wife should exert her energy to get you in line."

"Now where would the fun in that be?"

Lucien fought the urge to snort. He liked Westfield enough that he had practically forced one puppy on him, St. Aldwyn, and Grey. Lord Harry, on the other hand, could rot in hell.

Jealousy still churned in his gut, which greatly disturbed him. The feeling was as foreign for him as Miss Bakersfield believed the concept of love was to him. But it wasn't. Or at least it hadn't been. He had loved Alfred like a brother.

"She was the fiancée of my best friend," Lucien finally admitted, "the late Alfred Buxton, heir to Marquis of Linden, who perished in battle."

Westfield stilled, his gaze suddenly alert. "I am truly sorry to hear that. The loss must have been significant."

Lucien looked away. "It was a long time ago. Needless to say, he left me his hound, Pete, in his will."

"Never took you for a dog person," the earl remarked.

"Oh, and what kind of man did you take me for?"

"The defile and abandon them kind?"

Lucien blinked, then threw his head back and laughed. And with that, the gloomy tension that had overwhelmed the study dwindled away.

"I'm not," Lucien finally confessed, "A dog person, that is, or least I wasn't. The giant grew on me."

"And Miss Bakersfield is not happy about it?"

"According to her, it wasn't Alfred's dog to give away, since she had gifted it to him."

"They do not call it the act of giving for nothing."

"Not according to Miss Bakersfield."

"Interesting," Westfield murmured, a finger tapping at his chin.

"What the bloody hell is so interesting about it?" Lucien bit out, in no mood for riddles.

Westfield let out a low whistle. "Sounds to me like a ploy—your friend bequeathing the hound to you."

Lucien's heart lurched. "I cannot fathom why."

"Well, have you ever thought that perhaps your friend left the dog

with you to guide you and Miss Bakersfield together?"

As in *matchmaking*?

Lucien snorted. "That is ridiculous."

"Perhaps your friend was a romantic."

Lucien shook his head. "The chit hadn't known of the will, or it would not have taken her two years to darken my home with her temper. Alfred could not have predicted the outcome."

"True, he couldn't have known how long it would take, but perhaps he had it in his mind that it would eventually, one day, lead you down the same path."

Struck speechless, Lucien stared at Westfield. Could it be true? Alfred had allowed him to read her letters without any misgivings and the one or two times he'd refused, his friend had insisted. Had he attempted to endear the fiery chit to him, just in case? Had Alfred thought that perhaps if he did not return to Rosslyn, she and Lucien would suit? That Lucien would love her if he could not?

It seemed too unreal and complicated to even contemplate. Perhaps Alfred had simply wanted them to become friends, to grieve together should anything happen to him at war. If anything had happened to Lucien, Alfred would at least have had Rosslyn. His friend may just have wanted to same for him.

Yes, that sounded much more plausible.

Yet.

An array of mental pictures of him and Rosslyn entwined together behind a curtain, against a tree, in the carriage, and in her home flashed behind his eyes. The more he dwelled on the idea, the harder it became to dismiss.

They were a match.

Lucien let out a shaky breath.

"I see you do not find it far-fetched at all," Westfield murmured.

"I find his utter gall infuriating. He knew us better than anyone. He'd have known we'd fight over the damn dog."

"Battle and passion are two lovers, my friend. The one cannot coexist without the other."

"That still doesn't resolve the issue of her wanting a docile marriage."

"Doesn't it?" Westfield asked. "Seems to me the lady is just scared to have her heart broken again and marrying a mildly mannered man solves that."

With those parting words and a jovial salute, Westfield parted with his puppy, Marcus the Magnificent, leaving his words to churn in Lucien's mind.

Chapter 15

Rosslyn paced the length of the well-worn forest-colored carpeting in her bedchamber, cutting sidelong glances at the box of sleeping puppies stationed beside her bed. What madness had possessed her to take them? She could not possibly keep them here until she married. And even then, would her husband allow her to keep them? Ross might have to make it a condition to any offer of marriage.

At that ridiculous thought, she started to laugh. A condition upon marriage? But really, Lucien had no right to give away *her* pups, for he would have left them to certain horrific death if it had not been for her insistence. Just as Alfred had no right to give away Peter the Great...

It seemed rather symbolic to her that they both could give away an animal so carelessly, without thought. Except, sadly, Ross also knew that wasn't a fair statement. They gave the animals away with great care. She simply wanted an excuse to brood.

She also wanted to believe the worst of Lucien, the tempting yet utterly unmarriageable Earl of Craven. It would make things so much easier, would it not? A picture of the fury that ignited in him at her wild accusation of "defiling" flashed across her mind.

Ross was in for one hell of a storm.

Of all the things she could have said! Of course, he'd take offense to her charge. If accused in the wrong company, whispers could soon spark. His retort to her had been well deserved on her part and, besides, he'd been correct. Nary one suitor courted her favor. There was Lord Harry, but she lacked the strength to think about him at the moment, not when her mind was a whirlpool of confusion.

At the first touch of Lucien's lips against hers in her foyer, Ross had felt the now familiar sensation that accompanied his kiss, the one

where her entire world unraveled and she was powerless to stop it. That is, up until the next moment when his tongue had invaded her mouth and, for the first time, she decided to unravel right along with her world.

Then he had torn away from her as though she'd stabbed him with a pitchfork. His rejection had stung so deeply, she had behaved rashly and out of character in response. Over puppies.

Now, once again in the solitary confines of her room, she'd finally been able to get beneath the vortex of confusion to discover the gaping wound—and she admitted it ached.

Her shoulders slumped as she exhaled on a sigh. Alfred had given Peter the Great to his best friend. He must have known Lucien would care for the animal, perhaps even come to feel a great depth of feeling for it. She wanted to brood over the fact that he'd not gifted the dog back to her, but that was being selfish. Perhaps Lord Harry had been correct in his assertion that she did not know what she wanted, and was grasping at straws.

Ross sank onto the edge of the bed, covering her face with her hands. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Lucien's friend, the other earl, must think her a country hoyden, reared in the backroom of a barn. And he'd taken one of her pups, Marcus the Magnificent. No doubt Lucien had found homes for the other three dogs within the rest of their circle. And Lord Harry.

She wondered if his friends even knew just how rare a gift that was, for Lucien to trust them without reserve. Lord knew he had no such faith in her. She'd wager nary one of that circle truly comprehended the gift, but she also suspected that it was because Lucien rarely gave anything of himself away.

Ross let out a low groan, her gaze admiring the fluffy fur of the puppies. She should have trusted them with Lucien, not thrown a fit of pique and taken them.

The creak of the door startled her. Before she could jump up and obscure the puppies from her mother's view, a familiar, tall, hulking figure slipped into her bedchamber.

She froze.

His eyes found her on the bed without effort; his face expressionless save for his eyes. Those startling blue crystals glared at her like he was ready to battle a mighty witch.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped, but it sounded more like a hoarse croak without any real vehemence. Then, shaking her head, she said, "How did you get in here?"

"I've come to reclaim my property and as for the how—five pounds got me entrance and the location of your bedroom."

Her breath hitched, and for a moment Ross thought he meant *her*

until his gaze drifted to the puppies. The ache deepened.

"Bribing servants, I should have known. Go away, Lucien, I do not have the strength to fight you just now."

He must have sensed something in her tone, or perhaps it was the murmur of his name, because he said nothing for a while, only stared at her. When he did finally speak, his voice had gentled. He motioned to the puppies. "You have no business keeping them, Rosslyn, not with your mother, and you know it."

Little butterflies fluttered in her stomach. What was wrong with her? The tears that still lurked so close threatened her composure again.

"Please, just go. I will take care of them."

His eyes narrowed on her, and Ross looked away. She felt profoundly exposed beneath his scrutinizing stare.

"Have you been crying?" he asked, sounding somewhat aghast at the notion.

"No."

A hand raked through his thick mane. "Lying is beneath you."

"The same way sneaking into a lady's bedchamber is beneath you," she shot back.

"As improper as you marching into my home without a chaperone?"

"Well, aren't we a matching set of stockings?"

He arched a high brow. "Stockings?"

"I could not think of a better reference," she muttered miserably.

He glanced about her room, leaving no detail overlooked before his heated eyes returned to her. "The room suits you."

Her arms crossed over her chest. "And why is that?"

"The green wallpaper with gold and pink flower patterns," he murmured with a shrug. "It reminds me of your freckles."

"That's just odd." Still, her pulse leaped.

He shrugged. "Perhaps."

"You should go," Ross said to him. If her mother caught them alone together...

He came forward, lowering down on his knees before her. "First, I will have your word that you won't do something so foolish again."

"Foolish?"

"Do not give me your sass, Rosslyn. You journeyed to Vauxhall alone; barged into my home like it was your own; took the puppies without hesitation, and you offered Westfield a hell of a spirited show today. If it had been anyone else, you would be ruined and we'd be marching down the aisle."

Ross's face turned ashen as mortification finally overcame every other emotion. Tears burned in the back of her eyes and she blinked furiously to keep them at bay. "I am so sorry, Lucien, I do not

understand what I'm doing anymore. Please just go, I don't feel much like myself right now."

"Rosslyn, look at me," he murmured in a soft, raspy voice.

When she shook her head, his arm reached out, and Ross felt the outline of a warm finger beneath her chin. Hesitantly, she met his eyes as he lifted her face to his. Concern glowed in his gaze.

"Westfield is a friend," he murmured. "He will not say anything, except maybe to his wife. They don't keep secrets, those two."

"I suppose that isn't so bad."

He seemed thoughtful for a moment, a soft smile curving his lips. "She, on the other hand, will tell her two dearest friends who will in return tell their husbands, which will no doubt result in hours of taunts on me."

Her lips parted in dismay. "So word will spread eventually."

"The tale will make its round in our circle if only to needle me on the matter, but you needn't worry that they will ever tell another soul. It is also doubtful that Westfield will mention you by name, but rather torture his wife by dangling the information before her nose."

"Why, that's just awful."

His smile widened. "It's endearing."

Ross heard the affection in his voice. He cared for these people.

"I'm glad you made new friends, Lucien."

He glanced away, changing the subject. "So Lord Harry, you have taken a liking to him?"

"Is that your way of telling me you do not have another excursion planned to reveal his hidden sadistic nature?"

"Sadistic?"

"You tell me since you are the one revealing their true characters."

"I've found nothing on him," he admitted almost begrudgingly.

"I'm not surprised. He does not strike me as a man who wants his secrets to be known."

"So, he is your choice?" he pressed.

No.

But it wasn't as simple as all that. Her brows furrowed as she thought on her response. Ross hadn't quite thought of Lord Harry as a future husband, but rather as a good friend. She liked the dashing young lord, found him refreshing. He would certainly make a good husband, if not a great one—but would he be a good choice of husband for her?

No.

Instead, she said, "I haven't decided yet." Then, recalling the reason he'd ruined her list, she quickly added, "And I know you are eager for me to be gone from your life. I shall try not to be overly bothersome going forward."

He'd gone completely still, releasing a shaky breath when she finished. His eyes lowered to her mouth. "I've grown quite fond of our chats."

"So you wouldn't mind me living in London?"

Those icy blue eyes lifted to hers again. "I had no right to expect you to leave."

"I understood your desire for it. I still understand," she whispered, her hand reaching out to trace a finger along his jaw.

His head tilted into her palm. "Truth is, I wasn't ready to face you. You were moving on and I...I wanted to continue to dwell in self-loathing and guilt."

"I'm sorry I made it worse for you."

He stood abruptly, moving away from her touch. "In a sense, you made it better," he admitted, raking a hand through his hair. "Your courage alerted me to my lack."

Ross's heart lurched at his admission. "Moving on means letting him go, but that doesn't mean you must forget him. Besides," she said, attempting to lighten the mood, "you can never forget him, not when he entrusted you with Peter the Great."

He cast a skeptical look her way. "Should I be worried about your thieving tendencies?"

"Not at present."

He motioned to the box. "If I promised not to give the puppies away, will you allow me to keep the rest?"

Ross gave a reluctant nod and then addressed the issue that hung over her. "Why aren't you angrier? I practically accused you of spoiling me."

His gaze traveled slowly up and down her body, his eyes burning with disapproval and appreciation at the same time. "I should take you over my knee," he agreed.

"That would be most—" she wanted to say improper, but their entire relationship seemed to have sprung forth from that one word, so she opted for another instead, "unsettling."

"You strode into my home ready for battle, Rosslyn. Why was that?"

As always, the soft purr of her name on his lips did something to her insides, and she felt the warmth of it seep into her bones. "The puppies, of course."

"They are hardly a cause for such a dazzling performance."

Ross couldn't think of a reasonable thing to say to that. The truth was simply out of the question.

"What other reason can there be?"

He remained silent for a long time, watching her, his icy eyes narrowed in speculation. Finally, he said, "It can never happen again."

"I already said I wouldn't stir up any more trouble," she muttered.

His eyes burned into her. "I mean your tempting lips, molding beneath mine. Not unless you want to be shackled to a man of wild passion, instead of a complacent chap."

She inhaled at the sudden image of him crushing her lips against his, coaxing her heart out to the open. A blush crept up along her cheeks. Did she want that? A wild man, instead of one with a more reserved nature?

"You are bloody well doing it again."

Her head snapped back to him in surprise. "Doing what?"

"Tempting me to claim you."

"You never made my list," Ross pointed out.

Amusement flashed across his features, and he chuckled. "No, I did not."

Her stomach muscles coiled into a knot as she watched him. Ross wanted him to kiss her again. What would he do, she wondered, if she stood, sauntered over to him, and pressed her mouth against his? Would he kiss her back or push her away?

"What are you doing?" his hoarse voice filled her ears.

Ross blinked up at him, her gaze darting to the bed in confusion. She had stood and strolled to his side, behavior that spoke volumes of the sudden madness that gripped her. Dare she ask? Her eyes peered at him from beneath her lashes while his glowed like the lustrous light of a full moon. He gazed down at her with hunger, the same hunger that burned inside her.

"Kiss me," she murmured, letting all of her emotions pour into those two words.

He stood, watching her, those pools of blue liquid not giving away any emotion. Without a word, his hand lifted to trace the outline of her lip with a warm finger. His gentle touch disarmed her and Ross wove her hands around his neck, smashing her lips against his.

He'd gone completely still, his body rigid against hers. That did not deter her. She thrust her tongue between his teeth, demanding with her actions that he return her passion. As if being ripped away from a reverie, his grip tightened as he hauled her up against his chest for better access to her sweetness, matching her ardor with equal desire.

"You drive me mad," he murmured against her mouth before kissing her again.

She drove him mad? The man completely dominated over her senses. There was no escaping him, or what he did to her body. There was also no denying the connection between them, not with his breath capturing hers. Accepting that this may be the last time she'd ever be alone with him, she allowed all her emotion, her desire, her very soul to pour into the kiss like it was their last moment before the entire world went up in flames.

But as Ross resigned herself to savor this final kiss before she closed this chapter of her life, the earl apparently had other plans. His feet suddenly carried her to the bed, where he then, in no graceful fashion, dumped her onto the mattress. Inhaling a ragged breath, he retreated to the far corner of the room.

“What. Do. You. Want. From. Me?” The harsh whisper hit multiple cords within her, causing Ross to shiver. Confused, woozy, and completely bereft from the loss of his warmth, she stared at him at a loss for words.

What did she want from him?

Love.

Preposterous.

Marriage.

Now she knew she’d lost her marbles.

“I do not expect anything from you,” she said slowly, her brows drawn together.

His eyes turned harsh as he leveled her with a glare. “Want and expectation are two different things, Miss Bakersfield.” He advanced on her, his body poised and stiff when he leaned over her, caging her in with his arms, his palms flat on the mattress. “I am not the man who will be a biddable husband,” he bit out. “And since you seem to not want a headstrong man, this is where it ends.”

His vehemence—the finality of his statement—brought her up short.

“The puppies—”

“You can see your damn puppies when you wish,” he snapped. “Chaperoned.”

Her hands gripped the covers of the sheets, and a loud clap of thunder startled her, almost as much as the pain in her chest.

“You best be going,” she whispered in a broken croak.

Something moved in his eyes as he searched hers, but he only shoved away from her and gathered the box of oblivious pups. “Goodbye, Miss Bakersfield.”

Ross wanted to stop him.

Say something to stop him!

But she said nothing, only fell back on her bed, her mind a maze. She lay there a long while after Lucien left, brooding in silence. He’d reverted back to her formal title, signaling the end of their friendship. Hours seemed to pass and day darkened into night as she gazed up at the ceiling. After a long while, she whispered into the darkness, “Goodbye Lucien.”

Chapter 16

Damnation. She was here again. He could feel her presence in his home, intruding upon his peace.

A fortnight had passed since the encounter in her bedroom, where one kiss had robbed him of his very soul. He had said his farewell then—had wanted to distance himself from her immediately. Even so, he had left something of himself back in her room that day, an essential part—and it sure as hell hadn't been his cock, or else these two weeks wouldn't have been so damn torturous.

The first week had been manageable, when his cock had only hated him for not living up to his rakish reputation. But the second week, *she* had started to turn up in his home, enquiring after the puppies, after Pete, and giving his prick more reason to hate him, not to mention leaving him in a perpetual state of lust.

Damn it, did the woman not know he'd come dangerously close to claiming her for his own? She'd escaped the clutches of a beast only to stride back into its lair.

Devil take it!

He had acted in her best interest, had let her go. Lord Harry was a much better match than he and would make a more suitable husband. He'd kept track of the couple, noting they had fast become friends. Whether their friendship might bloom into something more permanent, or not, well even the papers speculated at that now.

Lucien refused to believe it hadn't been the right choice. He'd done the right thing to distance himself from her, from what she awakened inside him. As a precaution, he'd declined from attending any events, sequestered either in his study or bedchamber.

Still, his course of action hadn't prevented jealousy from stirring up uncertainty. Sleep eluded him at night, the foreign emotion making it

impossible. It coiled within, urged him to reevaluate, and see the situation in a new light before any man beat him to the prize.

And Christ, she was a prize.

Her laughter had the power to set his heart into a spin. Her fierce spirit, which had prompted her to whack a man over the head with a stick, beckoned to him. Even her determination, her resolution to save a bunch of whelps, had called to him. All that, however, did not come close to what exploded within him every time she touched him. Intoxicating and addictive, he would happily give his life for her touch alone, for a feel of her passion once more directed at him.

Confound it!

He could not walk the damn halls of his home without being aroused by her scent, which clung to the surface of the walls as if the space belonged to her.

By saints, he refused to endure it.

Jumping up from behind his desk, he shouted for his butler. The thin servant appeared at once at the door in his study. "My lord."

"Instruct John to pack my belongings for a lengthy stay at Craven Hall. I leave within the hour. He can follow in the carriage."

"Certainly, my lord."

Thirty-five minutes later, Lucien directed his horse out from the gates of his home; determination set solidly in his jaw. He had not seen Miss Bakersfield as he left but had felt her presence right to the bone. Bloody hell, if he believed in witches, he'd have thought she'd bewitched him.

He hadn't gone far, only two blocks, as a matter of fact, when a woman suddenly jumped straight into his path. With a loud curse, he brought his horse to an abrupt halt.

"Lucien! Thank God it is you! I need your help!"

His head whipped to the woman, eyes narrowing on her blond hair and delicate features. Lucien noted the baby in her arms and immediately held out a hand, lifting her and her son onto the horse before him. "Lady Belle?"

"For saint's sake, go! We cannot tarry."

The urgency in her voice spurred him into action, and they took off at the same time a furious male voice roared behind them.

"Belle!"

What manner of trouble had the chit gotten herself into now?

Lucien started to look over his shoulder, but Belle's exclamation stopped him. "Do not look. Just go! Go!"

"You have a bloody baby clutched in your arms," he protested.

"William won't fall. I have him safely attached to my person."

"Your husband is going to kill me," he muttered, urging his thoroughbred to a mild gallop. He'd be damned if he raced at

breakneck speed with a woman and her baby sharing his horse.

“Where to?”

“St. Anne’s Church, Dagenham.”

Lucien gave a curt nod, deciding against questioning her now, though at the back of his mind warning bells chimed.

“Where is Westfield?”

“Worried to the point of foaming at the mouth, no doubt. We must get to the church posthaste.”

Lucien nodded. The situation must be dire. He guided them without incident. Upon reaching their destination, she gently slipped from the horse, holding her babe carefully to her chest. The child appeared to be sleeping peacefully, none the wiser. Her eyes were round as she stared up at him. “Will you wait for me? This shan’t take long.”

“I shall hire us a damn hackney,” he muttered and watched as she disappeared into the church, his nose twitching as he surveyed their surroundings.

With no shortages of hired vehicles in the neighborhood, he secured Lady Belle a more appropriate mode of transport and sat atop his horse, waiting for her. He briefly recalled that Saint Anne was the patron saint of unmarried women, but also of housewives and women in labor.

Interesting. What is Lady Belle doing here?

Minutes later, Lady Belle rushed out of the church again, flushed and pleased as punch. Her son mimicked her mood and stared up at her smiling, now awake. Lucien grunted as he gestured for her to ride in the coach.

“What is going on?” he pressed as she entered the hackney.

“Baptism. Now, let’s go!” Lady Belle said, offering him no further explanation.

Spurring his horse on, he followed the hired vehicle down another path, one which would lead him back to his home. He cursed under his breath when at last they came to a stop before the very place he’d thought to escape from.

“There is no ridding myself of her presence,” he muttered.

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Belle said, sliding expertly from the coach with the baby in her arms.

“What the hell have I just gotten myself into?”

She offered him her most charming smile. “Tea, Lucien. Are you not going to invite me in for tea?”

He scoffed. “As if I can ever stop you,” he muttered and held out his arm. Ridiculous really, since she was holding a baby. But before he could bat an eye, she had placed the baby in his hands and swept past him, leaving him to blink at the big blue eyes staring back at him.

“Take your bloody baby back!” he shouted after her.

"Please mind your language in front of my son."

"Yes, *your* son, not mine."

He marched after her in long strides, at once noting she'd come to a stop in the middle of the hall. Coming up beside her, he followed her gaze to a surprised Miss Bakersfield, standing in the hall with a puppy in her arms.

A fortnight of fantasies had not prepared him for this encounter. He drank in the sight of her, his pulse quickening. An invisible hand had punched him in the gut, leaving him panting. He wanted to go to her, drag her into a private room, and kiss her senseless.

Her gaze met his only fleetingly, shock covering her face, before sweeping over Lady Belle and then to back Lucien, her eyes finally lowering to the baby in his arms.

"Lucien, dear," Lady Belle said, "introduce me to your charming guest."

"Miss Bakersfield," he said, catching himself when her name almost wrenched from this gut. "Meet the Countess of Westfield."

"A pleasure to make your introduction, my lady," Miss Bakersfield said in a rushed tone, visibly gathering her composure. "Please forgive my intrusion. I only came to collect one of the pups. If you will excuse me, my mother is expecting us back soon."

Only then did Lucien spot the willowy figure behind Rosslyn.

"Yes, of course," Lady Belle murmured, a thoughtful note in her voice—one Lucien did not care for.

Miss Bakersfield brushed past them, color high in her cheeks, her maid trailing after her.

"I will walk you," the words left his lips before he could think better of it.

She paused to stare at him. "No need to trouble yourself, my lord."

Before he could protest, she disappeared through the door. It appeared Miss Bakersfield wanted nothing to do with him anymore. The thought made his gut churn. Lucien would call on her later, his travel plans momentarily shelved. Illogically, he felt *he* could avoid her, but not the other way around. He turned back to Lady Belle, who looked at him with both elegant brows raised.

"Do not say it."

"Say what?" she murmured with big innocent eyes.

Lucien shot her a meaningful glower. "Whatever it is you are about to say." He rang the bell for tea, all but shoving the baby back into her arms. "I believe this is yours. Now, do you mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Miss Bakersfield seems nice. I hear she and Lord Harry may have formed an attachment."

"They haven't," he bit out.

"Then it must be a rumor," she murmured, ignoring his snappishness and gazing down at her baby with complete adoration. "As for this little thing, meet my son, William Baxter Tremaine. He was baptized today."

The significance of her words sunk into him with dread.

Lucien leveled her with a fierce scowl. "And where was your husband?"

She lifted her small shoulders in a shrug. "Chasing us about town."

"Westfield was the man who pursued us?" he practically growled, his voice laced with horror. "Where the devil did you have your son baptized?"

"Really Lucien, we must work on your language. Simon wanted to name him *Emmanuel*. Emmanuel! I could not do it."

He could not bloody believe his ears.

"So you snuck behind his back and baptized him at another church. I'm surprised they allowed it. Your husband should take you over his knee."

"Yes, well, the Roman Catholic churches are running low on members these days."

Lucien choked on air. "I take it back...he ought to beat you within an inch of your life!"

"A church is a church, Lucien."

"Yet, a Catholic cannot sit on a seat in parliament and your son is heir to an earldom."

She waved his comment aside. "For now they cannot, I have every faith that one day all of that will change."

"Change," he muttered in disgust. "This world is bad enough on a political scale, but you just subjected your son to a religious one as well. No way Westfield will stand for it."

She scoffed. "He can either come to terms with the church or comes to terms with the name, should he want him baptized again elsewhere—it's up to him."

"You are a devious woman, Belle."

"You have known that from the very beginning, Lucien. Now tell me, what is it you are going to do about Miss Bakersfield?"

His head shot up. "Do not get ideas in that troublemaking head of yours."

"It's a fair question."

Lucien snorted. "I am not planning on doing anything."

"You do not want a child of your own then?"

She rose and waded over to take a seat beside him, holding her son up for him to inspect. "Look at these little fingers'...it's such a gift to be able to hold something so tiny in your arms, protecting it from any harm."

"Like today when you rode recklessly with your child on the back of a horse?" he scolded.

"That was a necessary evil and you are changing the topic."

Lucien pinched the bridge of his nose. Lady Belle would be on his case until he answered all her annoying questions. William's little hand suddenly circled his finger, and he smiled down at the infant. *Emmanuel*. It was a terrible name. He much preferred William Baxter. It had a strong feel to it.

"Lord Harry is much better suited for her," he admitted after a moment.

"And why is that?"

His gaze drifted over her face, their eyes locking. She seemed sincere, truly curious to his answer. "You do not agree?"

"It is not for me to say," she murmured.

Drawing a long breath, he said, "He has a mild temperament."

"He will bore that woman to death with it."

A scowl darkened his face. "Miss Bakersfield fancies mild."

"I doubt that, Lucien. Miss Bakersfield isn't lurking about in Lord Harry's home, now is she?"

"She came to collect a puppy."

"Poppycock. Simon told me all about your little tiff. It seems to me you are searching for excuses instead of sweeping her off her feet."

He grunted in response.

Leaning over, Lady Belle touched his hand. "I don't know why you believe you won't make a good husband. I happen to know you will make a great one. So let me enlighten you about women like Miss Bakersfield. Our hearts recognize our true partner long before our mind catches up."

"Our hearts?"

She smiled. "The core of a woman who lurks *unchaperoned* in places she most certainly should not. I would know."

Lucien's heart tightened in his chest. Perhaps the oh-so-wise Lady Belle was right. Miss Bakersfield, *Rosslyn*, was not like every other woman. She'd gone into Vauxhall on her own, rescued puppies from a madman, and never once shied away from his passionate nature. Perhaps it was her mind that thought she wanted a mild-mannered marriage. Maybe her heart wanted something else altogether.

And if that were the case, Harry the Harrifcent *would* bore her into an early grave.

Lucien still wasn't certain exactly what he felt for *Rosslyn*, other than the fact that it was all consuming and slowly driving him mad, but as he looked down into the innocent eyes of baby William, he rather thought he had not lived fully until he established a family to call his own. He knew no other woman would be fit for the role as his

wife. No other woman possessed the means to awaken the longing inside him.

Only her.

Only Rosslyn.

"I see you have come to a decision," Lady Belle murmured, and he curled his lips into a wicked grin, drawing a laugh from her.

Which promptly died as her husband appeared in the doorway. Westfield's face was red with anger, his chest still heaving with labored breath. Lady Belle jumped up and handed William over to Lucien, who did not hesitate to take the baby this time.

"I already baptized William," she said to her husband. "There is no undoing it."

Lucien warily eyed Westfield.

"That's too bad," he snapped, "for I baptized *Emmanuel*, too."

"That's impossible! He was with me the entire day!"

Lucien noted a flicker of hesitancy entered his friend's gaze.

"I borrowed Maxwell for the baptism."

Lady Belle's eyes widened in unveiled horror. "St. Aldwyn allowed you to loan his son for the baptism of our baby!?"

"You left me no choice!" he thundered, his eyes hard. "You kidnapped our son and baptized him God only knows where. I had to take precautions for your reckless behavior!"

Lucien had never seen Westfield so wild with fury before.

"You cannot just choose a name I do not like. We were supposed to make the choice together!" Belle said.

"Yet you—"

Lucien turned away from them, striding to the doors connecting his drawing room with a small garden. "Come, little one, let us leave them to it. You will have an interesting upbringing with those two as it is, no need to hear their bickering so soon, though I have no doubt it is all out of love for you."

An image of how his own child may look rose in his mind.

Dark hair and emerald eyes.

Lucien's lips stretched into a wide smile.

Chapter 17

Rosslyn dashed up the stairs and closed herself in her bedchamber, flattening herself against the door, clutching Alphonse the Powerful against her heart. Tears spilled from her eyes. Had started the moment the fresh breeze of the beautiful day had hit her cheeks. Seeing Lucien cradling a baby in his arms with so much affection had knocked the breath from her lungs. Unwillingly and without her permission, her mind had imagined him holding *their* child as she stood by his side. The image, so overwhelming in its clearness, had her fleeing from his home.

Her gaze dropped to the puppy, his big eyes watching her with undetermined expectation. Kissing the top of his silken head, she walked over to the bed, placing the pup carefully in the center, tickling the back of his ear.

The burning ache in her chest, well, she had no one to blame but herself. Had she not called on his residence to visit the puppies every day in the past week, in hopes to catch a glimpse of him, her heart might feel a bit more improved. Instead, it hurt.

The handsome oaf had, most effectively, avoided her. By either secluding himself behind closed doors or leaving for his club. Oh, but his scent! It reminded her of sunsets and his wicked kisses. Why had she ever entertained the notion that Lucien might care for her? Or the better question, why had she not realized *she* cared for him sooner?

A great deal, in fact.

In truth, and she did not admit this lightly, she might very well have fallen completely in love with the loathsome beast. *In love*. Her. Again. A frightening thing. She sure looked a fright in the mirror. Wide eyes, so confused.

Not to mention that Lord Harry was much better suited to her needs

and far more gracious in comparison to Lucien. In fact, Lord Harry was precisely what she had in mind when she first set out to draft her list. Friendly, good-hearted, indulgent, funny, and handsome—a true gentleman—Lord Harry remained ever perfect. Would he propose? Perhaps. But the more pressing question remained that if he did propose, would she accept his offer?

Her heart balked at the prospect.

For it would be foolish to wait on her heart's true desire, because what would be the point? The cur had made it clear he would never commit. And was he, the Notorious Earl of Craven, what her heart wanted?

Unquestionably.

It was an echo of a deeply rooted certainty. One she could not give any thought to for her mother's sneeze interrupted, followed by a knock the bedroom door. A slight courtesy, for her mother, with no concept of privacy, entered before Ross could conceal Alphonse the Powerful. "Oh, there you are, dear," she murmured and stepped into the room, her eyes finding the puppy on the bed without effort.

"Mother, I am returning the pup at the first—"

"Oh hush, child," the baroness interrupted. "I do not care if you fill the house with animals. My left foot has already sunk into the grave."

"Mother! Do not say such things!"

"Oh, do not be such a goose, we all perish," her mother said, glancing at the puppy again. To Ross's absolute surprise, she then patted it on the head lovingly even as she continued to sniffle.

"But enough of that, I'm afraid I have some unpleasant news, dear."

Ross's entire body went on alert, her pulse fluttering.

"Your father is arriving tomorrow."

She blinked. "What?"

Her mother nodded sadly. "I'm afraid he heard of your friendship with the Earl of Craven and has forbidden it. I do not understand why he is in such distress over it, but I only now received word that we are to pack and be ready to leave by morning."

Ross clasped her upper arms with her palms and hugged herself. *Leave?* Her heart constricted painfully at the thought. Did her father honestly expect her to return home without her intended husband, to go back to the dreary existence of only *existing*? A life without purpose and aim...

A life without Lucien in it.

"Why has he forbidden the friendship?" she finally asked.

Her mother cupped her cheek, her eyes softening when she said, "Your father is not an easy man, but I suspect it has to do with Alfred's death."

"But that was years ago."

The baroness nodded. "I've heard rumors that the earl confronted your father, though your father would never speak of it to me, so I cannot be certain of the truth."

Unfortunate news, indeed.

Her father did not forgive easily, and if Lucien had confronted him in any way, he'd have made a lifelong enemy of her sire.

Her shoulders drooped. "I do not wish to leave."

"I know, dear. Your father has forbidden us to attend any more functions, but I burned the letter."

"You burned father's letter?" Ross asked astonished.

"Do not look so shocked. He shall have a grand time proving it. So we shall have a marvelous time tonight and simply act the innocent when he catches us."

Ross blinked, amazed by this side of her mother. The baroness had just proposed they defy her father.

"How positively wicked of you, mother."

The baroness chuckled. "My best years may be behind me, dear, but I still know how to pack a punch."

"Will father not punish us?"

Her mother scoffed. "Besides pulling the purse strings, the man can barely walk. He'd have to catch us first. Be as it may, I suggest informing your earl of your father's arrival. That man cares for you a great deal."

Ross shook her head at her mother's observation. Unfortunately, she had the wrong of it. Lucien did not care for her. He may desire her enough to kiss her, but not enough to do much else about it. And certainly not enough to stop her father from dragging her back to the country.

"Well, it seems I will never marry now."

"Of course you will marry! I shall find a way to make this right," her mother vowed.

Ross offered her mother a tentative smile and drew her in for a tight hug. When she pulled back, she glanced at the older woman's eyes, noting they still held more than enough spirit.

"If I ever do marry, what would I do without you, mother?"

"Not a thing, my dear, as I shall leave your father in the country and take up permanent residence here."

"You would leave father?" Ross tried not to gape.

"The man has never forgiven me for not supplying him with an heir. It's about time I leave him and his tyrannical ways behind," her mother paused, her eyes gleaming as she continued, "As long as you marry a man such as the earl. He would never tolerate your father's insolent ways, I am sure of it."

"I am sorry, mother." Because what else was there to say?

“Do not fret over me dear, I’ve had a full life, and you have been the best part of it.”

At that, Ross’s blasted tears gathered again.

“Goodness child! None of that! Your face will become all bloated and unattractive. We must already compliment your freckles; swollen eyes won’t do!”

Not for the first time in her life, Ross cast her eyes heavenward in exasperation. She quite liked her freckles, even if it meant her skin would never be the coveted pearly white.

“By all means, let us get ready for our grand night,” Ross murmured, dabbing at her eyes.

“I have just the gowns in mind!”

Taking a seat beside her, her mother handed Ross a box she hadn’t even taken note of amidst all that had happened.

“Well, open it,” the older woman urged with excitement.

Taking into account this was a gift from her mother; it could range from anything between mercifully demure to wildly scandalous. She stared at the box, her fingers tugging hesitantly at the perfectly tied lavender bow before lifting the lid.

She lifted the exquisite creation from the box. “This is the softest silk...” she murmured in awe, struck speechless.

Rich bottle-green silk covered her fingers. The dress was not scandalous, but elegant and graceful, and cut low enough to convey a dash of wickedness. Ross had never seen such a beautiful gown in her life.

“Where did you get this?” she whispered, unable to draw her gaze away from the gown.

“I had it commissioned from Madam De La Frey when we arrived.”

The stars in her mother’s eyes brought a smile to Rosslyn’s lips. “I’ve heard of her gowns, seen them even. This one is not as revealing as what I’ve glimpsed.”

“I am impressed myself, dear. All I did was relay some loving facts about you and this is the result.”

Her eyes flew to her mother. “What facts?”

“Your freckles being the result of your disobedience, for one.”

“Mother!”

“I daresay the Earl of Craven would not be able to resist you in this gown.”

Ross blinked at the sudden change of topic. If her mother was so overcome by the earl, she should marry him herself. He would certainly not marry Rosslyn. And while her mother only wished her to be happy, Ross dared not let her become too hopeful.

“The earl does not care for me, mother.”

“Oh posh, Rosslyn, it’s as clear as day. Even the Countess of

Rochford remarked on it. You are the only woman he has ever singled out.”

True, but they shared a mutual past acquaintance.

As if reading her thoughts, her mother continued, “And cease spouting the drivel that he is Alfred’s friend. The earl has no duty to further any friendship with you simply because of Alfred.”

“Why else then?” Ross murmured, the temperature in her cheeks rising. If not for Alfred, the true reason Lucien had rejected her was *her*, and that would sting too deeply.

“That would be a question best directed at the man himself, I imagine.”

Hah! Lucien would never confess anything that revealed a sliver of tender emotion. Ross pushed the thought away. She’d enjoy her last night of freedom, untainted by disappointment.

“Well then, let us get ready for our grand rebellion.”

Chapter 18

Lucien spotted her the moment she entered the ballroom. He stared, enthralled, as she sauntered into the room, a vision in green. Her hips swayed, alluringly, enticing every man with a pulse to glance her way. Repeatedly. The elegant gown of green silk clung to her womanly curves like a seductive song, one his fingers itched to play. His breath hitched at the sight of her, his heart constricting until it threatened to burst from his chest and show all present how this woman had brought him to heel.

His feet wasted no time in moving toward her, drawn by the inexplicable pull of her charm. He halted dead in his tracks, however, when he spotted her companion. By her side strode Lord Harry Spencer, happy as a peach, his eyes barely leaving the exquisite beauty by his side.

Jealousy slithered up Lucien's gut, hissing and rattling at the threat of another predator encroaching on his territory.

After Westfield and Belle had left with their son, one thing had become woefully apparent to Lucien—he was a profoundly, dim-witted ass. He wanted a family of his own, wanted to fight and bicker with his wife, wanted to create life within her someday. He wanted his house filled with laughter and his bed filled with warmth. He wanted a partner who would challenge him, question his beliefs, and stand beside him through glorious bliss and wretched hell. He wanted a home. He wanted it all. And he wanted it with *her*.

He had set out tonight for one purpose and one purpose alone—to stake his claim through any means possible. However delighted he would be if Rosslyn agreed to marry him of her own accord, Lucien was not above regressing to basic savagery if that was what it took.

With long, purposeful strides, he made his way to her, muscles

rippling as tension built up in his shoulders. Lord Harry wasn't a bad man, he rationalized. He was just in Lucien's way. If the man was smart, he'd recognize the futility of a fight with Lucien and step aside.

Haunting green eyes flew to his as he reached them. Surprise, fire, regret, hope, affection, confusion, and anger all flashed in that one glance before she swiftly cast her lashes down.

He hid a grin behind a perfectly executed bow.

"Miss Bakersfield," he murmured, capturing her hand in his and leaving a soft kiss on the inside of her wrist. "You look ravishing tonight."

"My lord," she murmured, wry amusement entering her voice.

"Craven," the other man bit out in way of acknowledgment.

Lucien's eyes never left Rosslyn's as he said, "Lord Harry, did not see you there."

For the first time since their eyes met, something else flashed in her eyes, something that caused Lucien's heart to pound his chest.

"Dance with me."

The orchestra started up a waltz, and for a timeless moment, they stared at each other. The room fell away, the music faded, and prickles of awareness dotted their skin.

Until the clearing of a throat broke their spell.

Lucien suppressed his growl, opting to pin the man a dark look, instead.

"This is Lord Harry's dance," she murmured.

"I don't care. Dance with me."

Lord Harry shifted from one foot to another. "There will be other dances, my dear. I can wait."

"Lord Harry—"

"Has agreed to sit this dance out," Lucien interjected, pulling her against him before she could offer another protest.

When Rosslyn was eleven years old, she decided it would be grand to be a princess. She'd imagined herself twirling about ballrooms with a handsome prince on her arm, adorned with diamonds and pearls. It seemed silly now, but she had never come as close to feeling like a princess as she did at that very moment. In the arms of the Earl of Craven.

As he twirled her about the room expertly, Ross was aware that it had been a long while since he had danced with any woman and she knew, instinctively, that he would dance with no other tonight or any night to come.

"You are enjoying yourself?" Craven asked above her head, and she heard the smile in his voice.

"Immensely. I do not know when last I enjoyed dancing as much as

this.”

“Then I shall dance with you more often.”

Ross ducked, not wanting him to see the regret in her eyes, which he picked up on anyway.

She felt his burning eyes right to the depth of her soul. “Rosslyn?”

“Do I repulse you, Lucien? Is that why you cut me off?”

If not for the slight crease on his forehead, gone in a second, she might have thought him indifferent to the question.

“Why the hell would you think that?” he snapped, then paused, searching for words. Finally, he said, “I believe you are the most beautiful woman in existence.”

Her gasp caused several onlookers to glance their way.

“But that night in my room—”

“You would have lost your virtue had I not acted like a bloody gentleman and thought of your best interests,” he interrupted in a low voice. “Christ, what will my fellow titled rakes think when they discover the notorious Earl of Craven has been nothing but a fraud? That his infamous reputation was a ruse to keep everyone at bay? That he had fallen hopelessly infatuated with a woman he’d only met once?”

Ross sucked in a breath at his admission. He pinned her with a dark look, causing her to tremble in his arms. Not once did he allow them to falter in their waltz, however, not even when his voice dropped an octave, and he admitted, “The night I approached you and told you I wanted you gone, it was just an excuse.”

Ross’s fingers twitched in his, her heart beating at breathtaking speed. “For what?”

He leaned down until his mouth caressed her ear. “You forget, I read your letters.”

Letters?

She shook her head as confusion lit her brow.

“The letters you wrote Alfred at war.”

A fiery red blush crept up her cheeks. *Those* letters.

Ross racked her brain at what those letters may have revealed. They’d mostly contained private accounts of her days, wedding considerations, and idle gossip of the village people.

“Alfred allowed you to read them...” was all she could get out, still staggered by his confession.

He nodded. “You always started your letters with a description of scent; the crisp smells of morning or the sharp musk of spilled ink coating your fingers. They became the highlight of my time abroad. It allowed me to hope, to endure those wretched times surrounded by death and decay.”

“I never knew,” Ross murmured.

“Through your words, I began to feel a kinship, a tug at my heart, and for the first time in our friendship, I was envious of my friend. When I heard of your arrival in London, I...panicked.”

The significance of his admission was still entirely lost on Ross. She stared up at him at a loss for words, her only thought being: *The great, notorious Earl of Craven panicked over me?* Her lungs drew in a deep breath. How she managed to stay on her feet and not stumble, she'd never know.

“But why would you panic?” she managed to ask, those blue eyes darkening, holding her spellbound.

“Ah, but sweetheart, you wield the power to unravel my entire world.”

His words had been soft. A low-pitched, gravelly whisper barely audible above the music, but it struck Ross like a blow to the head. For a second or two, she just stared at him, dumbfounded, a flood of emotions crossing her features, her lips parting in shock.

She closed her eyes, the moment too perfect to ruin. No other man would ever compare to him. No other man would ever do for her. But she dared not admit her feelings. It would be the cruelest torment. He deserved to know she would not be dancing with him ever again.

Her heart hurt at the thought.

“My father will arrive in London at any moment, and he has...” the words came out rushed, but still she hesitated, not sure how to put it.

Suddenly his features changed. His face hardened and his smile vanished. “He has what, Rosslyn?” he asked, his voice a firm whip.

Rosslyn.

A bittersweet quiver twisted down her spine. He must know of her father's part in Alfred's enlistment. It was clear from his shift in attitude at the very mention of the man.

“He has learned of our acquaintance and has forbidden me ever to see or speak to you again. We are returning to the country in the morning.”

The air surrounding them noticeably chilled and Ross watched as his shoulders bunched, his once gentle grip tightening fractionally. A dark, sinister look gathered in those icy blue eyes.

“When was this?”

Ross almost forgot to breathe at the note of steel in his voice.

“My mother informed me earlier today,” she managed to say.

“Yet here you are, defying his very command.” Those sky colored crystals bored into hers.

“You should see my mother. She is practically basking in defiance.”

His lips softened at the edges. It was evident he'd grown fond of the baroness. So many questions swirled inside her, but Ross refrained from asking. The man before her now had withdrawn behind a stony

wall of aloofness. No trace of the unguarded, engaging earl remained.

Absorbed in her own reflections, she let it go. Now may not be the best time to probe, so she surrendered to the way his overpowering presence took control over every step, every twirl. She'd lapsed into a brooding silence along with him, their dancing now nothing more than the mere movement of feet, a rhythm of patterns and steps. If this was to be their last dance, Ross was determined to at least enjoy every whirl of it.

All too soon the orchestra came to an end, bringing the music and all its dancers to an abrupt halt. Ross glanced up at him with a tentative smile, which froze in place at his expression. His face exhibited a thunderous expression, his gaze fixated on a spot beyond her view. A vein ticked in his jaw.

This was the man the rumors exalted. The man who's look possessed the power to destroy a lady's reputation. Ross finally understood. No woman would want this look directed at them. It certainly wasn't a look of a charming rogue, but rather, to speculative eyes, that of a hardened libertine. This savage side was also enough to strike fear into the heart of a lesser man. It certainly would have served him in the war.

The grip on her arm fastened, shackling her to his side as he led her toward the direction of her mother. It was then that Ross glimpsed a huge figure in the crowd and paled.

No.

She wasn't ready. It was too soon.

Her feet pulled up short, forcing Lucien to draw to a stand as well.

"Rosslyn?"

"I think I need some fresh air."

He must know. Must have glimpsed him, too—it was impossible not to. It explained his stony expression. His withdrawal.

The air thickened around her and her hands felt clammy. She touched her face with shaky fingers, certain of its pallor.

He studied her face for a long moment, most likely attempting to make sense of her reaction before nodding, directing her to the balcony doors in the opposite direction of her mother.

And father.

Chapter 19

Lucien was enraged beyond anything he'd ever felt before. Not even the day he had confronted the overweight bastard for his part in his friend's death had he felt such fury. Violence churned in his gut. He'd noticed her father the second the man arrived, recalled with instant clarity the putrid stench of animal fat that clung to the man's breath. Opening and closing his fist in tight white-knuckle clenches, he frowned down at the pale figure walking beside him, a slight droop to her shoulders.

Black clouds gathered in his eyes, his savagery heightened by his mounting panic. He refused to lose her now. He had not placed his heart at her feet only for her father to trample over it with his meaty paws. How dare her lecherous sire forbid her to see him again?

Lucien inhaled a deep breath, coaxing calmness to settle over him. The only way forward was to gather control of his emotions, analyze the situation with his usual shrewdness, and find a solution and execute it. His adventures with Rosslyn these past weeks had been the best time he'd had in years. For the first time in a long time, his life brimmed with purpose and excitement again—though admittedly it had taken him a while to grasp it.

Now, vigilance was key.

Rosslyn may not be aware of it, but her father was a sadistic son of a bitch. The plump bastard would do anything in his power to keep her from Lucien, and there was not a thing he could do about it. Well, perhaps there was one thing.

After all, Lucien wasn't ready to close this chapter yet.

The fact was, he would never be willing because he never intended to close it at all.

"Lord Harry will be searching for me for the next dance."

Lucien said nothing because didn't trust himself to say anything acceptable. The young pup could go dance with some other chit. He needed to remain by Rosslyn's side. He was unwilling to risk the chance of her father whisking her away, so he simply could not let her go.

"Do you want to return to the country, Rosslyn?" he asked, and held his breath.

Those big green saucers lifted to meet his gaze.

"No."

One word. One little-whispered objection.

His shoulders relaxed.

When they reached the porch, she stepped into the shadows—in view of the ballroom yet obscured at the same time. She'd seen her father, Lucien realized. That had been the cause for her shattered composure.

He studied her as she inhaled the fresh night air deeply into her lungs. She seemed to require a reprieve before the inevitable confrontation with her sire. And Lucien knew in that moment, standing beneath the stars with her, that he would do anything is his power to keep her by his side, to tie her as inescapably to him as he was bound to her. *His* woman. His exquisite, elegant, graceful, lovely, perfect, delicate...

His brows furrowed.

"What are you scowling about?"

His eyes lifted to hers. "I've run out of words to compare you with."

Instant color brightened her complexion and the knot unfurled in his gut somewhat. He loathed seeing her so lost.

"If I did not know better, I'd think you are a romantic."

"I've dabbled in the craft before."

She snorted, and then her features took on a more serious note. "Lucien, my father—"

"I can see why Alfred was so in love with you."

When she glanced at him, he swore for a moment her eyes danced, too. "Oh? That must be quite the revelation for you."

Quite the revelation, indeed.

"Would you have defied your father for him? Eloped?" Lucien found himself asking.

She seemed taken aback by his words, as was he, her brows gathering in introspection. "I can't say. I've never thought of defying my father before now..."

"Would you defy your father for me?"

Her eyes shot to his, her lips parting before she suddenly took a step back, drawing in a sharp breath.

Lucien glimpsed the large shadow of a figure moving into view at

the same time. But it was the baroness, who appeared first, wearing a look of bleak despair and completely devoid of her lively spirit, which spurred him into action.

He shoved the ever-mounting panic aside, ignored the lump gathering in his throat, and paid no heed to the sweat that broke out on his palms. Before Rosslyn could guess what he was about, and before *he* knew what possessed him, he snatched her by the waist and pulled her up against his chest, dipping her backward for a scorching, not-the-least-bit theatrical kiss.

Though, if it had been theatrical, he'd have applauded their act, as it was performed with perfection. Their bodies collided with one another at the same moment their lips did. Not once did Rosslyn struggle against him, but instead opened up for him in a way that heated his blood to boiling point. In fact, he could have sworn she had met him half way.

The sound of tittering and an "Oh!" from the baroness brought them to their senses, and they jumped apart.

Standing by and gaping at them stood not only Rosslyn's beyond-pleased mother and furious father, but also Lord Harry and Lady Wycombe, one of the biggest gossips in London.

Lucien smirked, stepping closer to Rosslyn when he sensed her intent to rush to her mother. He clasped her wrist in an unbreakable grip, gently hauling her to his side. They would face this together, whatever happened.

Her father, who was quite possibly foaming at the mouth, was the first to speak. "What have you done, you miserable hound? You sullied my daughter with your touch!" he boomed in a loud, chortling voice.

Lucien snorted, loud enough for the entire party to hear. When he felt Rosslyn jerk, he angled his body in a more protective position, serving as her shield. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

He felt no shame, however, when he directed his attention to her mother and announced, "Forgive my excitement, madam. I was overcome with joy when your daughter agreed to become my wife, making me the happiest man in the world."

"Why," the baroness gushed, her eyes lighting up once more, "that is marvelous news!"

"Woman," the baron snapped, "hold your tongue. Your daughter is not going to marry this...this...rotten scoundrel!"

Fury exploded in Lucien, not at the man's blatant insult, but at the baron's lack of respect for his wife.

"Oh, she will marry me," he bit out each word. "But more than that, once Rosslyn and I are wed, the baroness will reside with us for however long she wishes, and you will return to the country, where

you belong. Out of sight.”

The baron’s beefy cheeks mottled such a bright shade of red, Lucien was sure he’d pop a vein.

“How dare you, you repulsive dog!”

Lucien took a menacing step forward, his fist itching to connect with the man’s face. “I dare much of you, or have you forgotten that the only thing that lies between you and your ruin is me?”

“If you wanted to bring me to ruin you would have done so two years ago!”

Lucien arched a brow skyward at that. “I refrained only for your daughter’s sake. Now that she will be my wife, I suffer no such reluctance.”

“You will ruin her mother, as well, if you ruin me!”

“On the contrary, the baroness will always have a place in my home, as my mother-in-law.”

“This is outrageous! I will have you thrown in jail, you—”

Lucien was about to step forward and throttle the man but was halted when Rosslyn exploded beside him.

“Enough!” she burst out.

He stilled, unsure whether she would refute his declaration of marriage. Again a sense of panic choked him, and he fought to control his beating heart.

And prayed.

Enough!

The word echoed through Ross’s mind even after she’d shouted at her father, even after Lucien’s head turned to her with uncertainty and even after their audience’s eyes widened at her outburst. She pinned each one of them with a furious glower.

Lady Wycombe was practically jumping up and down in excitement over this latest scandal—for Lucien had ensured there would be a grand one—and could not wait to whisper into the ears of her fellow gossips.

Lord Harry stood motionless, his features blank of any emotion, yet his gaze took in everything. As his habit, his hands were clasped behind his back, and he was rocking back and forth on the heel of his boots. A practice she doubted he was even aware of.

Her father matched her glare with one of his own, but Ross was having none of it. Too long, she’d lived with his tyrannical ways. No more. If he could not treat her and her mother with the proper esteem, he did not deserve them. And she refused to be picked at and pulled apart by two men with axes to grind against one another.

Her heated gaze next landed on her mother, who stood preening with excitement over the earl’s bold declaration, so she cast him a

dark look.

Their eyes locked, clashed. How dare he declare such a thing without consulting her first? Not that she wasn't elated that he had, or didn't love his protectiveness, but his bickering with her father hadn't helped the matter. And what had he meant when he'd said he hadn't ruined their family only out of courtesy for her?

"Rosslyn! Remember your place, girl!" her father boomed, interrupting her eye-narrowing match with her *fiancé*.

"Do not speak to her in such a manner," Lucien snarled.

"You are making a scene," Rosslyn hissed, the clipped words directed at both of them. "Let us take this to a more private setting."

"I am not going anywhere with that dog!" her father fumed.

"He is not a dog! The only crime he is guilty of is confronting you on why you insisted his friend join the war!"

"His friend!" Her father boomed. "That good-for-nothing fiancé of yours was nothing but a coward!"

"How dare you insult him? He was the kindest man I've ever met and nothing compared to you!" Ross all but shouted at her father.

"I dare! Just as he dared to start vile rumors of me, saying that I cannot produce an heir because of impotency, calling me a useless sod. I was the laughing stock of the entire village!"

Ross blinked.

"That is utter rubbish," Lucien growled. "He had heard the rumors from your friend, Lord Whittling."

"A lie! Whittling said Buxton created the rumors to undermine my position."

"That doesn't even make sense, father. What use could he have for undermining you of your position?" Ross snapped.

"Are you calling Whittling a liar?"

"Yes," Lucien spat.

Her father's eyelids narrowed on him with menace. "You are as worthless as him," he said before his eyes flicked to Rosslyn. "And you will be punished for your insolence."

Lucien, who had gone still beside her, stepped forward at the threat. "You lay one hand on her, and I will kill you myself."

"She is in my charge, my property to dispose of as I wish! Step away from my daughter, you mongrel!"

Ross gasped at her father's choice of words. Apparently, Lucien had taken offense to it, as well, for a feral growl erupted from his chest.

It happened fast then. One moment her wrist was manacled and the next it was free. Lucien darted forward with remarkable speed. Her father's mouth was still spitting obscenities when the blow hit him in the jaw. Flecks of spittle flew through the air and right onto Lady Wycombe's rosy cheeks.

Ross heard the lady's shriek of disgust from a distance, rushing forward with her hand covering her mouth. Not in shock, mind you, but to cover her smile. Her mother's bright round eyes reflected her mood, as did Lord Harry's smirk.

Her father lay on the ground, the fat on his belly still wobbling, completely unconscious. Her wide eyes met Lucien's, whose gaze was still stony with anger. She did not blame the poor man. There was only so much of her father one could manage.

Her mother rushed to her side, and Ross was forced to look away from him. The baroness, never one for fits of hysterics, sported flushed cheeks, but her eyes were wide with concern as they traveled over her daughter.

"Are you all right, dear? Nasty business with your father, I daresay he will ever live it down!"

Ross did laugh then. Her mother had said *he*, not *we*, and for some reason, that was the funniest thing to her. "Oh, I'm fine, mother," she managed between fits of laughter, holding up her hand to ward off any more questions.

When her senses did finally return, she noted with wry amusement that their hostess leaned over her father with smelling salts, which only set off another bout of laughter. She laughed until her belly hurt, Lucien's earlier words hovering at the edges of her mind. She laughed until she could laugh no more. And then the tears started. They rolled from her cheeks with uncontrollable influence. And somewhere between the hiccups and wet cheeks, the thought came.

Would I defy my father for him?

Chapter 20

Contrary to what some parents led their children to believe, lightning did not strike a child in response to an act of defiance. On the contrary, there may not be a better feeling than that which accompanies willful rebellion, Rosslyn decided. But like all else, consequence is the shadow that follows its prey.

Word of her father's thrashing had spread like fire in an open field. And when it was discovered that it had been carried out by the Earl of Craven's hand, well, the fire had blazed into a wild inferno. By then her fit of laughter, or hysterics as her mother claimed, had all but dispersed, leaving Ross in a state of numb immobility.

The baron had regained awareness shortly after, and she'd been whisked away, much to the earl's chagrin, who had up till that moment not left her side. Of course, his friends had arrived to witness her mortification, and after a heated argument with the Earl of Westfield, Lucien had allowed them to take charge.

Ross's body, completely deprived of sensation, had not put up a fight when her mother led them away.

Once in the carriage, her father's behind had barely hit the seat before his mouth fired away on her poor judgment.

Her mind, overwhelmed by turmoil, didn't take much stock of all his threats, but only registered a few, which included: her never setting foot in London again; being cut off from her pin money; and something along the lines of "laboring away in the kitchen."

Pain overwhelmed her. Now that she'd been separated from Lucien, her father would never allow her to see him again. Furthermore, her father appeared happy to be leaving his daughter's reputation in tatters.

The journey home hadn't taken long and her father wasted no time

instructing servants to load their belongings, which, Ross noted with dismay, had been packed while they were away, onto the carriage.

They were leaving tonight.

With a longing glance toward the door, she considered running. But that would accomplish nothing. And Ross would never leave her mother to endure her father's wrath alone.

A storm had also gathered outside. Already rain and thunder ruled the night. It was sheer madness to travel in such weather. But it seemed her father wanted to leave nothing to chance.

Utterly heartbroken, Ross had just ambled past the morning room when a hand snaked out to snatch her arm. Another hand clamped firmly down on her mouth, muffling her yelp as she was hauled against a strong chest.

Ross blinked up at Lucien, drinking in the sight of him. He was completely drenched and probably chilled to the bone, but his eyes burned with intensity. Her pulse leaped to life.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a hushed voice.

His eyes narrowed, his grip securing her in place. "Did you honestly believe I'd let my future wife leave me?"

"You are referring to your high-handed declaration, I suppose. I do not recall you ever *asking* for my hand."

"I kissed you and we got caught."

"I must be daft or unaware of this new, modern advancement in marriage proposals," she snapped.

He raked a hand through his sodden hair, his palm wiping over his face. "Why are you acting this way? I bared my heart to you and you said nothing, now you..." he paused, his brows creasing, "Are you still in shock?"

He must be referring to her earlier hysterics. He did have a point, however. All she wanted was to be with him, and here he was. Why was she snapping at him? Perhaps she *was* still in shock.

And what was this "baring his heart" business?

Ah, sweetheart, you wield the power to unravel my entire world.

Had that been him "baring his heart"? He hadn't said she *had* unraveled his world, only that she had the potential *to unravel* his world. But more to the point, what did that even mean?

"You confessed I wield power," she finally murmured. "Not much else."

His expression darkened, and Ross thought he might shake her. Instead, he merely crossed his arms over his broad chest and glared down at her.

"By all that's holy woman! *That* is what you took from my admission? That you wield power?"

Ross's face flamed. Straightening her shoulders, she returned his

glare with a haughty one of her own. "What else was I supposed to take from it?" Her hands settled on her hips. "I know you desire me, that much is clear. At least I think it is. But as for the rest, you could have meant the power of seduction!"

He leaned in toward her until he was so close the warmth of his breath skimmed her cheek. "Is that not the greatest power of them all?"

Ross gripped her fluttering stomach, suddenly mesmerized by his closeness. The very air seemed to crackle between them.

"If this was all a happy ruse to ruin me, Lucien, to get back at my father for sending Alfred to war, so help me I will happily wield any power at my disposal to ruin you."

His predatory gaze held hers a heart-pounding moment before dropping to linger on her lips. "Bloody hell woman, you are enough to drive the pope to drink." His eyes rose again to hers, before he continued, "I have every intention of making you my wife, Rosslyn. In fact, I am here for that very reason—to take you home and ruin you in every possible way so that you have no choice but to marry me."

She knit her brows in puzzlement. "You are serious?"

"Whenever am I not?" Accusation blistered in his eyes.

"I thought—"

"You think too damn much, and always the bloody worst of me, when all I've done is fall in love with you," he snarled the words, as though the idea disturbed him greatly.

He *loved* her?

A slow smile spread across her face. "You love me?"

He looked disgruntled but nodded. "I said you wielded power over me, did I not?"

Ross stepped toward him, practically bursting with radiance.

The door chose that untimely moment to open, and her mother filled the threshold.

"What the hell is going on here?" Her father said, coming up behind his wife.

Ross shivered, her stomach twisting in a terror-stricken knot. Dread chilled her heart, and she froze when all she wanted to do was leap into Lucien's arms.

"You!" her father shouted at Lucien. "I will have your head!"

Her mother, whose gaze darted between her and the soaked earl, suddenly shot Ross an imploring look and mouthed *run*.

One heeded one's mother when told to run.

Without further delay, Ross circled her fingers around Lucien's wrist and tugged. This was the man she loved with all her heart and, yes, she would defy her father to be with him.

No matter the cost.

Whirling on her feet, she dashed off in the direction of the side door, Lucien hot on her heels.

An instant later, just as they reached the door, one of his hands settled on her back, and he dipped, without breaking pace to scoop her off her feet and into his impossibly strong arms.

Behind them, Ross heard her father bellowing curses, but not once did Lucien's grip on her slacken. If anything, he seemed to tighten it more, possibly afraid she might regain her senses and call a stop to the escape she initiated.

Embraced safely in the warm cocoon of Lucien's arms, Ross rested her head against his chest as he ran out into the night. Soaked within a matter of minutes, she erupted in delighted laughter. Because in that joyous moment it didn't bother her in the slightest.

She was home.

Lucien took one look at Rosslyn, drenched to the bone, thought about how he had nearly lost her *twice* tonight, and came to a swift decision.

"I'm going to make love to you."

Her astonished gaze flew to his. "I suppose once we are married I shall have no choice but to let you."

"I mean now."

She glanced around the speeding carriage. "Here?"

Lucien almost laughed. The complete bafflement of her gaze was something to behold. "Yes, here."

"Surely that's not done."

His gaze bored into her for a second or two, and then he began unbuttoning his shirt. "I see convincing you will be more trouble than I anticipated. *You* will be more trouble than I anticipated. I am up for the challenge. Now, undress."

Her gaze dropped to his chest before flicking back to his face. "We are in a carriage!"

"I am aware," he drawled, shrugging out of his shirt and tossing it aside. "But I have been dreaming of this since the night of our first kiss."

She blinked, startled. "You have?"

He nodded. "And if I don't feel your body against mine soon, I will rip those clothes off you myself."

She studied him with narrowed regard, her gaze locking on his naked chest. "I suppose to fight is futile."

He hid a grin. Oh, his little minx wanted him just as much as he hungered for her. "Extremely futile."

"And my clothes *are* all wet."

His breath hissed from his lips. "We must see to that."

"Although," she paused, and Lucien thought he might just die, "your

home is not far from here.”

He tugged at his breeches. “We are not going to my home.”

Her eyes followed his movements with fascination. “We are not?”

“It will be the first place your father sends Scotland Yard, so I have other plans.”

“Oh? And what are these plans of yours?”

He tugged her closer until she was sitting on his lap. “Defile you, of course, and then perhaps make an honest woman out of you.”

She swatted his chest. “Aren’t you just the rake?”

He stared down at her, watching with some amusement as she traced his chest with a hesitant finger. Her touch aroused him as no other woman’s ever had. For a timeless second, he closed his eyes to savor the feel of the connection.

“Don’t forget notorious.”

“Ah yes, or else you would wait for a bed,” she teased.

“Give me time. In the carriage, bed, against a wall, on the stairs, I promise to have you everywhere,” Lucien murmured against her skin. Passing a hand down her gown, he gruffly added, “I don’t want to ruin this exquisite creation, however.”

Her lashes fluttered as she lifted them, her eyes blazing with desire. His heart surged in response. It was all he could do to fight for control.

“Please, do.”

At the husky note in her voice his breath quickened. He cursed. This woman. Would she ever fully understand what she meant to him? Just how much he cherished this moment with her?

With her fierce spirit and loving green eyes, she had brought him back to life.

He kissed her then, urgently and with all the love he held in his heart, ripping at the laces that held her gown together.

A soft throaty moan escaped her when her breasts sprang free. He took them into his mouth, suckling them, his tongue flicking violently around each little bud. She arched against him, giving him better access to her lovely charms and her slim, delicate neck.

“Rosslyn,” he murmured against her skin. “You are so bloody beautiful.”

She chuckled, a raspy sound, hoarse with eagerness. “You aren’t even looking at me.”

He pulled back and raked his gaze over her. “Yes, I am.” This was her first time with a man, but he doubted he could be gentle just now. “This is going to be quick, sweetheart. I don’t know if I can go slowly.”

She took his face between her hands and rose to press her lips to his, bestowing him a gentle, loving, and achingly passionate kiss.

When their eyes locked again, fire blazed in their depth.

"I want everything..."

A powerful eruption of emotion flooded him, along with a hot new wave of desire. "Christ, I love you," he growled.

Neither of them seemed to care they were drenched, only that they fulfill their needs. Without reservation, Lucien captured one of her breasts in his mouth, as one hand tugged at his breeches and the other lifted her skirts before sliding up to her entrance.

He began to stroke her, her hips arching in rhythm with his fingers.

"You're so ready..."

"Then what is taking so long?" she murmured in an aching voice.

She gasped when his dexterous fingers vanished, and Lucien chuckled. "So greedy."

Then he kissed her, not gently, but with a powerful need, as he gripped her waist and lifted her over his rod, pressing at her entrance. She sucked in a breath and pushed her fingers through his hair as he lowered her further until her slick wetness finally coated his rigid erection.

"Lucien."

His name on her lips snapped the last of his remaining control, and with a single thrust of his hip, he entered her fully, catching her gasp of pain on his lips. He remained motionless inside her, giving her time to adjust to his size.

His Rosslyn, ever fierce and defiant, squirmed above him, her fingers clinging to his shoulders.

Lucien groaned.

"It feels odd," she said, wiggling her bottom again.

"Hold still, woman, or this will be over before I manage to thrust a second time."

His body broke out in perspiration as he slowly began to drive upward into her warmth. It was a happy position for it brought her other charms so much closer for his enjoyment. Twirling his tongue around the mounds of her breasts, his hands gripped her slender hips, urging her, teaching her the perfect rhythm to satisfy them both.

She arched into him, her hips starting to move on their own. A throaty groan ripped from him as she began riding him, her movements slow and sensual.

"Too damn tight," he rasped out, savoring the feel of her tight canal descending along the length of his erection for all but a second before he could no longer take it. Gripping her hips, he held her in place as he pounded into her. He buried his face in her hair as he thrust upward, again and again, and could feel himself nearing the crest as her nails dug into his shoulder.

Suddenly her eyes flew open, and she jerked.

Lucien pulled back to watch the beauty of her face in this moment, her movements almost as frenzied as his. He could feel his own release surging ever nearer.

“Come for me, sweetheart.”

He lifted one hand from her hip and found the soft bud at her entrance, flicking over it until a scream tore from her lips, announcing her pleasure.

With a satisfied growl, he quickened his pace, the sudden rush of intense pleasure robbing him of his very heart. Thunder rolled in the distance, and his voice matched the roar as he shouted her name, exploding inside her.

Lucien rested his head against hers, his breathing labored and his arms wrapped around her in a gentle embrace. They sat like that, entwined together for what seemed like hours. In the darkness of the carriage, he thanked God for sending such a precious gift across his path.

Chapter 21

When it came to the act of love, or rather, the act of joining bodies together, Ross had opted to approach it with the same fearless manner in which she approached most things. A decision she was grateful for. The man was insatiable. The pleasure she'd received at the machinations of his hands still set her heart a flutter. And in the aftermath of the loving, Ross had known she loved him. Of course, she'd already known she had *fallen* in love with him, or she would never have defied her father. But the instant he'd shouted her name in pure ecstasy, Ross had known she'd truly follow him anywhere.

Even to the dusty rooms of a crusty old house.

They had arrived at their destination some hours after their passionate encounter. It was a rickety-looking abandoned building on the outskirts of London. With no servants in residence, the house smelled stuffy and dust coated almost every surface, but Ross did not mind—not if it meant she was here with him.

Her father, on the other hand, would never stay in such a mite-invested place. So when Lucien had assured her he would not find them here, she'd wholeheartedly agreed.

She had not been certain what Lucien's plans were for them, but as soon as they dashed through the door, Lucien had proceeded once again to strip her of her clothing, which was already in tattered ruins, and once again made love to her.

Right there in the parlor against a wall!

Ross hadn't been certain how it would even work, but it had, and it was marvelous. Her cheeks burned at the memory.

After that particular spell of delicious joining, he had then carried her to a bedchamber, the only room in the house that was habitable, having been cleaned for their arrival. Ross still didn't know who lit

the scores of candles that had flickered on every surface. Even a food basket had been placed for them.

She glanced over to Lucien, who lay beside her on the bed, his posture relaxed and at complete ease. With a grin, he offered her a slice of cheese. She obediently bit on the morsel, her eyes glittering with amusement.

“Did you do all this?” she asked in awe, taking in the artfully arranged candles again.

“I ordered someone to do it, does that still count?”

She chuckled, rolling onto her stomach, tracing the outline of his bare chest. “That depends, my dear lord, on what your intentions are.”

His eyes burned with love and desire as he lowered his head to kiss the tip of her nose. “I did not give you the proposal you deserve, sweet, so I figured I’d give you a night of passion.”

“You have already given me that,” Ross pointed out, but her heart soared nonetheless.

“Are you complaining?” he asked, a dark brow arching.

“Never! A lady can never receive too many grand gestures.”

“Demanding wench.”

“Well, rest assured that you have hopelessly defiled me.”

She expected him to laugh and tease her but instead, his gaze turned intensely sharp, studying her for a heart-pounding moment. Ross had to fight the urge not to squirm beneath his probing gaze. And then she recalled his declaration of love.

“You said you loved me.”

Those piercing eyes searched her face. “I do.”

“You haven’t asked me how I feel,” she noted with a frown.

To her surprise, his lips stretched into a wolfish grin. “I figured you loved me, too, Miss Bakersfield.”

Ross laughed as he reverted back to her title, propping herself on her arm. “How did you *figure* that?”

Glorious muscles rippled as he shrugged. “Since I so hopelessly fell in love with you, it only stands to reason that you also hopelessly fell in love with me.”

She pinched his arm, laughing when he jerked and swatted her hand away. “You are such an arrogant rogue! What if I did not feel the same way?”

“I suppose I may have doubted my arrogance if you hadn’t been so eager to be found alone in dark places with me, run away with me, and, most crucially, dispose of your clothing in my presence,” he said as a mischievous glint entered his eyes.

“Lucien! You are incorrigible.”

Before she could blink, he had her on her back, those blue eyes piercing her very soul. “I am in love; there is a difference.”

He dropped his head to the arch of her neck, showering her with kisses.

"You are insatiable, did I mention that?"

"Only with you. It killed me to think you were going to marry someone else, that someone else would have the right to touch your body like this," he murmured, taking his time to explore her exposed skin.

"You cannot possibly want to *again*."

He grinned, pressing into her, the evidence of his desire hard to miss. "I will never get enough of you."

She ran her fingers through his disheveled hair, murmuring, "You have turned me into quite the wanton woman, Lucien. I will be the worst proper countess ever."

He met her gaze for a heartbeat, and then he leaned over and ran his fingertips over her breast, circling it over and over until her nipple hardened beneath his touch.

"Your skin is so soft..." he murmured, lowering his head to her other mound. "A scandalous countess for a wicked rake, we are perfect for one another."

Ross lifted her chin and closed her eyes, overwhelmed by pleasure as his tongue danced across her flesh. A moan vibrated in the back of her throat when his fingers found the sensitive folds between her curls and one finger slipped inside her.

"Are you sore, sweetheart?"

Her lids fluttered open at the question to find him looming over her, his eyes glinting with hunger. Still, he had thought to ask her. His consideration warmed her heart and set fire to her blood.

"I love you," she said simply.

He was like a Greek god coming to life before her very eyes. At the words, his chest expanded and his nostrils flared. Then his lips crushed hers in a deep, plundering kiss, the kind of raw kiss that curled a woman's toes. Clutching his shoulders, she kissed him back, heat searing down her spine.

"You did not answer. Are you sore, sweet?" he rasped when he, at last, ended the kiss, his eyes glazed over with lust.

"Not enough for you to stop."

That seemed to be the right words. With a single-minded thoroughness, he set out to explore her body, hunting for every freckle on her naked skin. Then she felt his tongue *there*.

With a shriek, her eyes flew open. "What are you doing?"

He chuckled, his breath on her curls tickling her. "I'm kissing you."

Her cheeks flushed bright with embarrassment. "But, there?"

"Sweetheart, where is your sense of adventure?"

When she attempted to close her knees, his hands clamped down on

her legs to keep them in place, his skillful tongue flicking inside her.

She could not help the moan of delight from escaping as she relaxed under his attentions. He chuckled again and promptly renewed his efforts with a skill she had no hope of fighting against.

"Mother Mary," she gasped as his tongue continued, flicking, stroking, and twirling, the sudden rush of warmth spreading within her causing her hips to buck.

A scream tore from her as he sent her flying off the edge with an explosion that rocked her world, her entire body trembling with pleasure. She barely noticed that he had risen over her until he cupped her face between his large hands. He waited until her eyes fluttered open, the fierce light in his own telling her how much he loved her. Then he leisurely pushed his hips forward to enter her, stretching her until her velvety depth was filled with his hardness. He repeated the motion, thrusting into her again, and again, slowly and deeply.

Ross could not think any longer, possessed no sense of time or reason. Heady and tense, she writhed beneath him, wanting him with a keen desire that robbed the breath from her lungs. Splaying her hands over the span of his chest, she could feel the flex of his muscles beneath her fingers, feel his determination to go slow. Again and again, he took her over the edge until finally, what felt like hours later, she felt the hot liquid of his own release as his body shuddered against her.

"You said you loved me," he murmured after a while, his hands caressing her hair in smooth, gentle strokes.

They lay entwined together in the aftermath of their loving, limp and replete, lids heavy. And Rosslyn had to admit, if she could stay forever in his arms like this, she would never leave this dusty old house.

She smiled. "I *figured* since I ran away with you I had to, now didn't I?"

Low laughter rumbled in his chest.

"I will make an honest woman out of you, sweetheart, as soon as I procure a special license."

"I suppose that will take about three days?"

At the slight croak in her voice, he stilled beside her. Oh good heavens, she'd forgotten how perceptive the man was.

"What is it?" he demanded, abruptly rolling her over to stare down into her eyes.

Blast it. Now he would think her some silly chit. But it was impossible to deny him anything, so she answered, "I do not have anything to wear."

The wicked glint entered his eyes as they wandered over her body. "We could just get married naked, I much prefer you without clothes."

"I'm sure the bishop will not feel the same way."

The rich sound of his chuckle was infectious. "The bishop would be envious. But do not concern yourself with such things, I have everything in hand."

"A wedding dress?" she asked skeptically.

"Of course. And flowers and friends and cake."

"Oh! Even a cake?"

"An unnecessarily big cake that cost me a fortune."

"Oh, Lucien, you did not have to go through all that trouble."

He traced the outline of her soft, swollen lip with a finger. "Special license or not, I will still give you the wedding of your dreams."

She gave him a coy smile. "Dabbling again in the craft of romanticism?"

His lips twitched. "There is power in such art, I hear. Besides, I've never met such an impetuous little witch who dared steal my heart."

"What a wickedly rude thing to say!" she chastised him.

But Ross had never felt as content as she did then, staring up into the eyes of the man that completely turned her world inside out. Never once did it cross her mind that coming to London would result in her falling in love again and never would she have dreamed that it would be with the Earl of Craven, a notorious rake, a noted scoundrel, and now, the protector of her heart.

One thing still nagged at the back of her mind, however.

"What did my father mean when he said if you wanted to ruin him, you would have done so two years ago?"

He seemed to consider her for a moment, his jaw clenching. Then, as if he had arrived at a conclusion, he nodded. "After Alfred's death, and after I had recovered enough to return home, and after I met you at your home to speak the words I still regret, I paid your father a visit. Anger spurred on my actions, actions I do not regret, but your father took great offense after I humiliated him before all his friends and peers."

"What did you do?" Ross whispered, her eyes wide.

"I exposed him as a cheat at a poker game and, when he denied it, I prompted his friends to check the sleeves of his jacket."

"That's not so bad."

He lifted a dark brow at her tone. "It is the gravest insult to cheat a man from his belongings under the guise of being his friend. Your father lost the respect of his fellow peers that day. You can never recover from something like that."

"No wonder he was home more often after Alfred's passing. I wondered the reasoning behind my father's request for Alfred to join

the war once I learned of it. I suppose that those rumors he believed Alfred started were enough for my father to ruin his life.”

A shadow crossed his features.

“What is it?”

He looked away. “What is what?”

“Lucien, is that not the reason my father sent Alfred to war?”

His chest heaved with a heavy sigh. “In part, I suppose. I only found out the truth after my return, after one of his friends approached me out of guilt,” Lucien took a deep breath, before continuing, “After Alfred showed interest in you, and after the rumors had surfaced, your father wagered his friends how long he’d last in battle. That’s why he made it a condition. Perhaps he thought he’d get revenge that way.”

It took Ross a moment to comprehend the full meaning of that statement. She gasped at the horror of it. Alfred had *died* because of a *wager* her father made?

Disgust overwhelmed her, followed quickly by shame, and then finally sorrow. Sorrow for Alfred, and sorrow for Lucien, who lost a brother of the heart for such a senseless reason. “I am so sorry, Lucien,” she croaked, tears gathering in her eyes.

“Shh, love, it’s not your fault,” he comforted, pulling her closer into his embrace.

She pulled back to gaze into his eyes. “So that is what could ruin my father, even now? If Alfred’s father ever discovered the truth...”

He nodded.

Ross still couldn’t believe her father’s wickedness. Thank God she chose to defy him now and follow her heart. “Thank you for telling me.”

He inclined his head, his eyes filled with emotion.

Ross traced the hard edges of his jaw. “I do love you, with all my heart,” she murmured, smiling through her tears. But she noticed his eyes widened at her deeper, solemn admission. “Do not tell me you had doubts about that, Lucien. It is not the first time I have said it, you know.”

He shook his head, his lips brushing up against hers. “It is the first time you said it like that, my love. For all my confidence, you have the power to rip my life from my own hands,” he said, emotion thickening his voice. “Say it again.”

“Kiss me again first,” she countered. And he did.

Chapter 22

They were married two days later in a small ceremony consisting of close friends and family—except her father, of course. Her wedding dress had been a lovely, simple, and elegant Madam De La Frey silk gown in soft cream, which complemented her vivid green eyes, her light brown hair, and, oh lord, even her freckles. There had been a cake, a colossal one, certainly too big for the entire wedding party to consume.

Ross had been rather sore after their first magnificent night together in the crusty old house, which she'd grown rather fond of, so Lucien had insisted she rest and recover her strength for their wedding night. That did not, however, stop the insatiable man from teaching her the most shocking of acts! Including the act they'd witnessed of Lord Lincoln and his paramour. Her cheeks still flamed whenever she thought of it, though, mind you, she wasn't complaining.

Married.

Ross still reeled from that revelation alone.

There had been a moment after the wedding ceremony that Ross had glanced over to her new husband, filled with so much love for him, and a sudden unmistakable clarity dawned on her.

"Do you think Alfred knew?" she had asked.

Heated blue eyes connected with hers, the air crackling. "Knew what, sweet?"

"That we'd be drawn to each other...that something in me would recognize something in you and that it would be impossible not to love one another. Do you think that is why he never introduced us?"

He had stilled, his brows drawing together in consideration. Finally, he said rather nonchalantly, "I *am* a rather devilishly handsome fellow."

She slapped him playfully on the chest. "Oh stop! You are deplorable."

He chuckled, but sobered when he said, "He left me Peter the Great."

Ross's eyes had widened after considering that, dwelling over the significance of Alfred's actions then.

Gruffly, he added, "Alfred also knew us, perhaps even better than we have come to know ourselves. He saw our flaws, our weaknesses, as well as our loyalties. Whatever his reasons, I think he knew we would never have betrayed him—no matter what we may have come to feel for each other—because we both loved him more than that."

Ross nodded her head in agreement, even as her mind struggled with how impossible it all seemed. Nonetheless, she had lifted her head skyward then and thanked Alfred for gifting his friend Pete.

At present, they were all gathered in Ross's new home, along with some of Lucien's dearest friends, attempting to consume the world's biggest wedding cake. Her mother bounced from guest to guest in a flurry of blue skirts and rosy cheeks.

To Ross's delight, the day after she'd run away, her mother had walked out on her father. Ross and Lucien had helped to sneak her out of the house and later regaled her with the tale of the baron's awful wager, which cemented the decision.

They heard little of her father since then, only that he'd initially demanded the return of his wife and daughter in a letter sent to Lucien. Yesterday, Lucien had sent a letter of his own, in the form of someone named Derek Shaw.

Lord and Lady St. Aldwyn approached them, breaking Ross's train of thought. She had demanded descriptions of all of Lucien's friends before the wedding, and taken great care to engrave them in her mind, especially the ones she'd seen at the musical.

Once at their side, the tall, darkly handsome lord bowed, snatching her hand away from Lucien's.

"Lady Craven, may I just say that I never thought your husband possessed the ability to catch such a magnificent creature."

Ross glanced at the marquis's wife with raised brows, but the woman only scoffed, a twinkle in her gaze. "I daresay Lucien said the same about you, dear."

Ross tried to tug her hand from the man, but he gave her a wolfish grin and then turned her palm around to place a lavish kiss on the inside of her wrist, his mouth lingering there.

Beside her, Lucien growled and snatched her hand back. "Get your paws off my wife."

It was all too strange, the lord kissing her wrist while his wife stood looking on.

“Do ignore them. They are settling imagined scores,” the lady said, smiling at Ross. “I’m Josephine by the way, but please call me Jo, everyone does.”

St. Aldwyn sent Lucien a wicked grin. “I should have stuck my tongue in your wife’s mouth, Craven, *then* we’d be even. Be glad I only gave her a peck on her hand.”

“Damien!” Lady Josephine scolded.

Ross’s head whipped to her husband. “You kissed his wife?”

He groaned in answer, before saying, “They weren’t married yet.”

Ross narrowed her eyes.

“Kissed my wife, too,” another lord drawled.

Ross glanced over to Westfield, her face flaming as she recalled her behavior in front of him in this very house. He gave her a warm smile.

“Bloody hell,” her husband cursed. “You are determined to put me in the doghouse.”

Both men shrugged.

“Nothing ever got to you before,” St. Aldwyn drawled, “seemed like the best revenge.”

“You two are incorrigible,” Lady Belle piped up.

“Congratulations on your nuptials, by the way,” Westfield murmured, and his wife repeated the sentiment with warm, loving eyes.

“How is young William doing?” Lucien asked, his tone softening at the name.

“Oh, he is doing brilliant,” Lady Belle answered.

“William *Emmanuel* Baxter is doing fine,” Westfield agreed.

“Emmanuel?” Ross murmured with two raised brows.

Lady Belle shot her husband an “I told you so” glare.

“That is a good strong name,” Ross hastily amended.

The entire group fell silent, exchanging a glance before bursting out in laughter. Only Lady Belle stood, her arms crossed over her chest, tapping her foot, unamused.

At Ross’s confusion, her husband lowered his head to murmur in her ear. “The day you fled my home with Alphonse the Powerful, Belle and I had just come from baptizing young William Baxter at a Roman Catholic Church, except Westfield, having borrowed St. Aldwyn’s little one, baptized him Emmanuel at the Church of England the same day.”

Oh good heavens!

Ross’s lips formed a silent “Oh.”

“It seems everything worked out for the best,” Lucien finished and lifted his head, but not before he kissed the tip of her ear.

“Wait a moment,” Ross said, and all eyes turned to her. “You assisted Lady Belle, against the wishes of her husband, to baptize her little boy in the Roman Catholic Church?”

Westfield's visage darkened. "I owe you for that one, *friend*."

"I did not know I was doing so at the time," Lucien replied gruffly. "My mind was on other matters."

Everyone looked at Belle, who only smiled sweetly.

"Besides," Lucien continued, his lips twisting in a derisive smile, "I was *friends* with your wife first."

All eyes swiveled back to him then, even Ross's. She was intrigued by this side of her husband, of his helping a friend to fight for her baby's name.

"Christ," St. Aldwyn suddenly said. "Of all people, how did you manage to succeed in capturing such an exquisite creature?"

A blush stole across her features as Ross realized the earl referred to her. She turned to Lucien with a delighted smile.

He winked down at her.

"Damn if I wasn't the one captured."

Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed *Give Your Heart a Rake*! Would you please take the time to leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper followed soon after she had devoured all of the library's historical romance books!

When she's not meddling in the lives of her characters or drinking copious amounts of coffee, she's off on adventures with her partner in crime.

Wilde lives in a town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains, South Africa.

The Devil Meets Lady Veronica Pebblesworth

Excerpt

bit.ly/LadyVeronica

Chapter 1

It was the belief of Lady Veronica Pebblesworth that a great many things could be accomplished if one only put one's mind to it. And if there was one thing Lady Veronica Pebblesworth was known for, it was accomplishing a great many things.

At the age of three, Veronica demanded her father gift her with a violin.

At the age of eight, Veronica had mastered the instrument, as well as the piano.

At the age of ten, she began tutoring the servants, who wholly indulged and doted upon her, on mannerism and speech and stopped only once she'd been satisfied she had accomplished the task to her liking.

By thirteen, she already spoke four languages and, having accomplished much of everything—from the tedious task of embroidery to the much more vigorous art of horse riding—Lady Veronica became, quite understandably so, bored. Thus her attention advanced to more romantic matters.

But that too would soon prove to be naught but foolishness on her part as, at sixteen, Veronica discovered the truth about boys when her heart was stolen and promptly broken by her one true childhood love who she caught kissing Alice Martingale in the stables.

It came as no surprise that by eighteen Veronica had developed into a fine young lady and was, well, a force to be reckoned with, having gained the respect and hearts of all who knew her.

Forgoing the age-old tradition of securing a husband, she instead focused all of her will power on bettering the lives of those in need. Men after all, as Veronica had learned, remained creatures of instinct which existed to appease their most basic of urges, whereas women

possessed the fine quality of intellect. How men managed to fool the entire world into believing them superior remained quite frankly beyond her. And five years of living a gloriously unattached life had only strengthened Veronica's opinion.

It was why when her father calmly notified her that he would betroth her to Daniel Crane in a fortnight if she did not procure the hand of a gentleman of her own choosing, Lady Veronica Pebblesworth only smiled.

Yes, much could be accomplished if one only put one's mind to it and today Lady Veronica gathered all her forces with the sole intention of running off Daniel Crane.

Her nose wrinkled in the corners as she studied the tea-stained list she'd penned for that exact purpose.

How to ensure Daniel Crane scurries for the hills

1. *Encourage him to decline her father's offer.*
2. *Develop an ear cringing giggle.*
3. *Develop bad table manners.*
4. *Work up a fine stink.*
5. *Be exceptionally rude.*
6. *Mention his earnings in conversation.*
7. *Threaten to burn his hotel to the ground.*
8. *If all else fails—hire thugs to kidnap him and hold him hostage until she married another.*

A tremendously long list it was not, but it should be sufficient for her cause. No gentleman worth his salt desired a harpy for a wife.

Clearing her throat, she stepped onto the stool that her footman provided for her and flicked her gaze over her audience before addressing them with a steady voice, "My dear friends, I have called upon you today to discuss a dreadful matter which has befallen me."

An eruption of worried exclamations and concerned eyes darted around to glance at each other before settling back on her.

Veronica's eyes glided over her friends with affection. She had never minded that the girls and boys of her age thought her an oddity. More outspoken and livelier, she'd always known she was different, more accomplished. Her view of the world did not lack the vibrancy absent in most of the children she'd grown up with.

She also did not mind that her dearest friends consisted of their resident cook, stable boy, butler, two maids, one footman and her Irish wolfhound, Fox.

"Oh dear," Cook chimed, fanning her face with a cloth. "Tell me you're not dead, child?"

Veronica's eyes softened. "Dying, Mrs. Dapper, and no, I'm not dying."

"Are you leaving Waverly Manor?" the butler asked, his brows creasing into a frown.

"Not in a manner of speaking," Veronica commented.

"Has your father taken ill?" her maid asked with dismay.

Veronica shook her head. "No Mary, I daresay he will outlive us all," she remarked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Then what can it be?" Maddy, the scullery maid, asked.

Veronica straightened and her eyes took on a familiar stubborn glint. "I fear it is a fate much worse than all of that. My father has informed me that I have one fortnight to find a match of my own choosing or I am to be married off to Mr. Daniel Crane, the hotel owner."

Her declaration hovered in the air like a magic trick waiting to be revealed. It was clear from the faces of her friends that they did not wish for this to happen. The cook sputtered, the butler's face turned purple and the scullery maid stomped her foot in indignation. Many hands covered their mouths. All of their expressions seemed to indicate the horror of the fate her father had decided to inflict on her.

Charles, the butler, recovered and looking as imperial as ever, broke the shocked silence, "You are a lady of fine means, surely his lordship cannot mean to marry you to an uncouth businessman?"

"He does not deserve a fine lady such as yourself," Jack, the stable boy, declared with outrage.

Veronica nodded her agreement. "Mr. Crane is rumored to be setting up a hotel in Ireland. I am to be whisked away to another country altogether!"

Her statement caused another uproar of loud exclamations and fiery denials. Their disapproval served to fuel Veronica's determination and sealed the fate of Daniel Crane. He would not gain her hand in marriage.

Her lips widened.

"How absurd!"

"He can't mean to take you away!"

"You belong at Waverly Manor!"

Veronica gave a curt nod—her sentiments exactly. How absurd to expect her to pack up and leave the life she'd built. More absurd even was the prospect of calling Ireland her home, whether only for few years or not. All on the whim of a man. Veronica desired stability and routine; she thrived on it.

"He's a hotel owner."

Veronica waved Cook's comment aside. "His station is of no importance." *At the moment.* "Daniel Crane is reported to be an

obnoxious old goat that has lain with almost every woman in England. As you are all aware, I've no intention of wedding a dolt, certainly not one the likes of him."

Her friends nodded their agreement at her assessment of the infamous Mr. Crane. The furious bobbing of their heads reminded Veronica of wooden dolls attached to cords but she remained ever grateful for their loyal support nonetheless.

"I hardly believe that to be a fair assessment, my lady, since you have never met me," a dark voice interrupted from a now ajar door.

Heads swiveled and Veronica nearly leaped from the stool but managed to remain as composed as a marble statue to his probing eyes. Her heart, however, beat at an alarming pace and she took a moment to catch her breath.

She'd seen a portrait of Daniel Crane but now believed it to have been of his father or perhaps an uncle, not this Greek god who towered before her. Tall, about six foot two in Veronica's estimation, he boasted broad shoulders and a solid chest. His hair, the color of blazing fire, bespoke of a fiery temper and even from across the room Veronica could tell his eyes gleamed a vibrant shade of green. The freckles across the bridge of his nose and upper cheeks softened the hard lines of his jaw and afforded him a younger, boyish look. But for all his striking appearance, Veronica sensed this was not a man to be trifled with. No indeed, he may just be a force to be reckoned with. No matter. Her mind would not change.

Her eyes darted to her father who appeared by his side, regarding her entourage with a narrowed gaze. A fair amount shorter than the mountain hulking beside him, he was not less intimidating.

Veronica's mouth twitched. She happened to be a master at mastering intimidating men.

"It would seem, Waverly, that we found the culprit who appropriated your servants," Crane drawled, his eyes dancing.

At the amusement in his voice, Veronica flushed. "Appropriate is hardly the correct term, not to mention eavesdropping never did look good on a man."

Crane rewarded her with a crooked smile.

"Veronica!" Her father boomed. "Show some manners, girl. Mr. Crane is a guest in our home."

"Ah yes, the infamous hotel owner—Mr. Crane. My apologies sir, it is, of course a pleasure to meet the man my father has commanded I marry if I cannot find a more suitable match in a fortnight."

His smile faltered.

Her father sputtered as his brows drew together.

Veronica did not bat an eye.

"Be that as it may," she continued with a wave toward the wide-

eyed servants, "I am merely informing the household that I may not be here for much longer but that they needn't worry, there will always be a place for them in my home, wherever that may be."

"What are you going on about?" her father asked, somewhat at a loss.

"Why if I marry, as you are forcing me to do."

His eyes narrowed even more. "You are taking my cook with you?"

Veronica tilted her head with a small smile. "I am taking them all."

"You will not!" he exclaimed, and then paused, fighting for composure. With a loud clear of his throat, he said in a more composed voice, "What I mean to say is, that is a matter for your husband to decide."

"It will be the terms of negotiation with my future husband, yes," she raked a superior glance over Mr. Crane, "whoever he may be, or you will just as soon wake one morning to find me married to the butcher."

The low ringing sound of laughter burst from Crane. "You said she was an odd one, Waverly, you never said she possessed a flair for comedy."

Comedy? For the first time in her life, Veronica found herself utterly speechless. How dare he laugh at her!

In a practiced art, she allowed her lips to curl in disapproval and her eyes to glare daggers at the red-headed Adonis. She exuded loathing and distaste, but on the outside remained remarkably calm and impressively unreadable. It was perhaps why, Veronica mused as she saw the laughter reflected in his eyes perish, people thought her cold as ice. She possessed the uncanny ability to appear completely unaffected, even while her insides raged with emotions.

Prepare yourself, Mr. Crane, for you are about to draw your blade on an expert swordswoman.

Crane's eyes narrowed on the little viper's calm air. He would be damned if he let her get to him with her saucy tongue and icy demeanor. Not one ounce of emotion broke through her veneer of stoic expression. But he wasn't fooled. Great passion lay beneath her mask. He sensed it. Felt it even, as if it were radiating from her in waves of suppressed desires.

He'd heard people call her a curious creature, an oddity that preferred the company of servants to that of others. It had also been said that she was a cold fish. Daniel did not care for rumors.

His heart hammered in his chest as he envisioned plucking the pins from her hair. He imagined glorious shades of chestnut tangled in his fingers as she moaned into his mouth.

Bloody hell.

A whisper of a long ago memory echoed off the walls of his mind. A yellow morning dress, white daisies, lyrical laughter that lured him closer. Not a hint of recognition flared in her gaze as she stared at him in dispassion. Not even a morsel of uncertainty. Over the years he had caught glimpses of her in the village where he'd set up his first Inn and from what he could tell, she displayed no regard to the divide between rich and poor. She welcomed the opportunity to assist a person beneath her notice, exhibiting no care for the chasm in stations.

Reports of her beauty did not do her justice either. She was a bit too short, like a child, yet her womanly curves molded into an exquisiteness that removed any doubt of her being a young hatchling. Delicate brows framed intelligent, catlike eyes.

He'd wanted her from the moment he'd spied her in her yellow dress, daisies sticking out from her hair. Yet he was no lord and, at the time, possessed no means to support such a beautiful creature the way she deserved.

So he had worked. And slaved. And worked harder still. Until he'd built an empire so vast and wide no one dared look down on him.

Now, Lady Veronica was finally within his means and grasp. Her lack of suitors presented him with the perfect opportunity to stake his claim and Daniel preferred a woman with spirit. Lady Veronica Pebblesworth bore an abundance of spirit.

Yet she stood before him, almost eye to eye on that stool of hers, looking at him with such disdain and superiority, it set his teeth on edge.

She had no knowledge of who she challenged with her battle ready stance. Had no notion of what he'd endured to possess her. His eyes narrowed on her small, stiff form. Lady Veronica fancied a battle? He'd damn well give her a war.

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